



THE BIG GREY MAN OF BEN MACDHUI



AFFLECK GRAY

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Foreword by

Rennie McOwan



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*His was the Wisdom of the Field and the Forest,
And the High and Lonely Places knew him of old.*

When I began this study of the Big Grey Man I was inspired and encouraged by the enthusiasm of my old friend and erstwhile mentor ‘Mam Suim’, the pseudonym by which the late William Marshall, Nethy Bridge, was known to his intimate friends and to the wide circle of readers of his nature articles – ‘From a Glen Window’ – which appeared weekly in the *Northern Scot* for over forty-four years. Their source was the fount of his remarkable knowledge of the flora and fauna of Strathspey. He was an authority on Scottish wildlife, and his vast first-hand experience was gladly given and widely drawn upon by both students and experts.

The sequel to these researches on the Ben MacDhui phenomenon is largely due to his unfailing interest, but it is a matter of sincere regret to me that just as the task was completed he passed away in his eighty-fourth year.

It was privilege to have been an intimate friend of one whose very life was the field and the forest, and to whom much was owed in my early forestry days.

To ‘Mam Suim’s’ memory this work is dedicated with a full sense of gratitude and humility.

Affleck Gray

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Foreword

The legend of the Big Grey Man of Ben MacDhui persists, that hair-raising tale of a giant spectre which is reputed to haunt the highest mountain in the Cairngorms.

It is good that Affleck Gray has tackled this subject because there is no one who is better qualified. As a young man he roamed the glens, corries and peaks and at one time knew of over two hundred howffs in the hills which he and his friends used as a base for climbing and exploring.

In addition to bothies (of which some have now gone), he found caves and home-made shelters amid the rocks and he regularly slept out there, getting to know the sights, sounds and scents of the Cairngorms in a way that cannot ever be fully gained from a hotel, guesthouse, hostel or even a tent. Age and medical operations now mean he cannot go to his beloved hills with the energy of a stag, but he still pours up his love of the hills in articles, books, research and in a generous giving of his knowledge to friends.

A daily kilt wearer, he has a strong sense of his Clan MacPherson ancestry and of his predecessors as hill men and women, but he is no shallow romantic, and while appreciating the often heroic character of people in past centuries he takes a practical, painstaking, careful approach in his historical researches.

It is fair to say he is puzzled by the phenomenon of the Big Grey Man and he sets out to carefully work through all the facets of the spectre's pedigree, Gaelic legend, the accounts of early mountaineers, the effects of the wind, mist, snow or animals in creating odd sounds and sights, of psychic phenomena, ley lines and even claimed visitors from outer space.

The subject needed someone with the right 'feel' for the hills and an efficient approach to adequately analyse it and it has got the right man. He tends to suspend his own judgement, but remains scrupulously fair when recording the views of others, although one senses that inwardly he must be chuckling at some of the more bizarre theories.

Perhaps it is true that the atmosphere of the old Cairngorms has gone for ever, perhaps the conditions which created the Grey Man or provided its arena have vanished under increased numbers of people on the hills, recreational facilities in the glens and ski-installations on the slopes of neighbouring peaks.

It is fitting that the subject has been caught by a man who knew the old hills and who has lived through the modern changes.

The Grey Man may be shadowy. Affleck's approach is stark black-and-white and it is good to see his researches in print once again.

Who knows? It might prompt the Grey Man to make another appearance and if he does then Affleck will remain calm, but a little with interested and possibly mild surprise and then write down another comprehensive note of what is a continuing and fascinating story.

Rennie McOwan

Author's Preface

The strange phenomenon of Ben MacDhui, variously described in Gaelic as Am Fear Liath Mór, which is sometimes corrupted to Ferla Mór or worse, and even Ferla Mhór (a crowning indignity for the aspirate denotes the feminine!) or Am Fear Glas Mór. The Big Grey Man has excited the imagination of the public, and particularly the mountaineering fraternity, for almost a hundred years.

The subject has been debated at length in public and privately; it has been featured on television and radio and innumerable articles have appeared, and continue to appear, in the press and magazines. In 1949 the Edinburgh Psychic College published a booklet in which a few abnormal occurrences on Ben MacDhui are recorded. In *The Mummy of Birchen Bower and Other True Ghost Stories* Harry Ludlam devotes a chapter to the subject, but confines himself wholly to the experiences most frequently repeated of two distinguished mountaineers. There are frequent references to the Grey Man in other books.

The phenomenon has been dramatised. McGregor Urquhart's *The Grey Man* is a detective thriller based on the subject, and, in *Fair Game*, Nigel Tranter introduces the Grey Man and tells a weird story. He told me that it was a subject which had always intrigued the Tranters as a family.

Every other year there is a recurrence of correspondence in the press as a result of someone's uncanny experience on, or near, the mountain. The phenomenon is invariably associated with Ben MacDhui, or its environs. Never, to my knowledge, except for one recorded instance and eerie experiences recounted to me after publication of the first edition, with any other mountain in the Cairngorms massif. This in itself arouses curiosity.

Every other year, up until the last ten years or so, there was a recurrence of correspondence in the press as a result of someone's uncanny experience on or near Ben MacDhui. Climbers continue to have these odd experiences as testified by the letters I continue to receive but the subject has not hit the headlines for a number of years.

It has been claimed that the story of the Big Grey Man is legendary, but, unlike most legends, it is supported by a considerable volume of modern evidence, both aural and visual. It does not appear, however, that any particular effort has hitherto been made to

collate all the stories about the phenomenon. My own research on the subject has been conducted over a period of years, and every scrap of evidence that single-minded and assiduous search could uncover has been recorded; but, despite exhaustive inquiry and reading, I have failed to discover any reference to the Big Grey Man of Ben MacDhui in Highland mythology and legend further back than the late eighteenth century. Dr Ernest Lang, Brechin, has provided me with evidence of a Grey Man dating back to the fourteen, sixteen and seventeen centuries, but, in view of the circumstance and location of the encounters with these spectres, I think it highly improbable that there can be any relationship to the Ben MacDhui *bochdan*.

James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd (1772–1835), who made a brief excursion to Ben MacDhui in the course of his second Highland journey, asserted in verse at least that he was acquainted with a man who ‘Beheld the *fahm* glide o’er the fell’. John Hill Burton, although he had no personal experience, refers in his *The Cairngorm Mountains* (1854) to the *famh* also. Neither Hogg nor Burton were, however, Gaelic scholars, and as there is no such word in Gaelic what they probably intended was *famh* (a mole), or *famhair* (a giant). They may indeed have known about the legend of the *Famh*, a supernatural mole the size of a large dog with an enormous head, which was supposed to haunt the Cairngorms.

Despite the poverty of reference in most of the old volumes which have been consulted, there is some evidence, however scanty, that the Fear Liath Mór was discussed in Rothiemurchus and Mar long before the classic experience of the late Professor Norman Collie was thrust upon an astonished public in a blaze of press publicity in 1925, no doubt to the unbounded dismay of the reticent professor. Since then few years have elapsed without some press reference to the subject.

It is not the intention here to embark on a thesis on demonology, fairies, banshees, leprechauns, brownies, ogres or kelpies, or attempt to dig very deeply into the metaphysical or supernatural, but simply to record the notes and cuttings which I have retained from boyhood onwards, and the all too meagre results of my searchings for information; and finally to reach a few obvious conclusions, and leave unanswered questions which are beyond my limited comprehension.

Correspondence has been voluminous, and as far as possible I have tried to have personal contact with those still living who have had either first- or second-hand experience of the Grey Man. It has been a time-consuming occupation, not only in respect of correspondence, which has ranged from the Shetlands to France, and from France to Los Angeles and on to Australia, but even more so in exploring the many hopeful alleys of information, many of which, as it transpired, were finally reduced to rather more than blind alleys by persistent questioning. Apologies are due to many interested friends who have frequently despaired of studying in Grey Man’s ‘dossier’, but I was determined to resist the temptation to close the file until I felt satisfied that little was to be gained by keeping it open any longer.

My qualifications for assuming the role of unofficial biographer of the Grey Man are based not on personal acquaintance, for I have been singularly unfortunate in this respect, but on a life-long interest in the subject, and a deep and abiding love for those mountains in the shadow of which I was born and bred, and which I knew so intimately for a period of over thirty years. Memories are fragrant of camping for weeks on end, alone or with a companion, on the high plateaux and corries; sleeping in caves or holes in the rocks, in tents on the mountain tops, or in the grand old bothies, some of which no longer exist. Others which had degenerated through misuse or untended age into miserable hovels have been rescued and rehabilitated by the splendid efforts of the Mountain Bothies Association. The happiness of camping in some high corrie contemplating the wild scene is now denied to me as a result of age, but memories of those transcendent days remain ineffably fragrant.

AFFLECK GRAY
Corrour
Pitlochry
Spring, 1989

A Haunted Mountain

'Wis that the place whaur the Deil wis dropped doon frae Heaven?'

Scottice

The classic story of stark terror on Ben MacDhui during the past sixty-odd years is the experience of the late Professor Norman Collie which dates back to 1891, but which was only revealed by him publicly in this country in November 1925. It has been repeated frequently in the press and magazines since then, and sometimes with a degree of embellishment which would have astonished and dismayed the austere professor if he had lived to read these accounts.

It is not generally known, however, that Collie recounted his experience publicly elsewhere at a much earlier date. In an article entitled 'The Cairngorm Plateau', which appeared in *Scotland's Magazine* in November 1961, Ronald W. Clark, a notable historian of mountaineering whose book, *The Day The Rope Broke*, is a memorable story, memorably told, of the great Matterhorn tragedy of 1865, refers to the Grey Man, and in particular to Collie's experience:

Looking across to these slopes on a fine day, it is difficult to appreciate how they can have come by their reputation as the haunt of Britain's only mountain ghost. In the twilight, and alone, it is not so difficult. The legend of Ferlas Mhór, or the Great Grey Man of Ben MacDhui, has had a curious history, which the sceptical might correlate with man's interest in mountains. It may – or may not – be deeply rooted in Celtic history, but James Hogg certainly claimed more than a century ago that he knew a man who had 'Beheld the *fahm* glide o'er the fell'.

For some inexplicable reason, Clark avers, local legends on the subject are more numerous on the Rothiemurchus side than the Mar side; but they must have received a distinct jolt in 1831 when Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, in an article in the *Edinburgh New Philosophic Journal*, claimed that he and two companions had seen a form of Brocken while descending from Ben MacDhui.

The Grey Man appeared, however, to survive these embarrassing revelations, and stories about him circulated round the mountaineering world as climbing gathered impetus in Scotland in the late nineteenth century.

It was not until the turn of the century that Ben MacDhui's famous ghost 'hit the headlines'. It did so in New Zealand, and through one of the least likely agencies – Norman Collie, a scientist, as well as a mountaineer of distinction, whose 'acute faculty of observation' was remarked upon by the Royal Society after his death. Collie spoke of the Grey Man to mountaineering friends in New Zealand, and while no record exists of his exact story, it seems likely that it was similar to a later and better known statement . . .

The local New Zealand Newspapers reported Collie's story under the headline of 'A Professor's Panic'. News of it spread and eventually reached the ears of Dr A M Kellas, a Scottish mountaineer of considerable fame who carried out much pioneer work in the Himalayas, and who died while taking part in the first reconnaissance of Mount Everest. Kellas wrote to Collie claiming that he had actually seen the Grey Man . . .¹

Collie's recital in this country of his experience was greeted with scepticism, and numerous facile explanations were put forward in the crop of letters to the press which followed: the Spectre of the Brocken, falling stones, wind in the gullies, deer, and so on. But as Ronald Clark concludes his article:

Some, or all of these, may have been responsible, but if so it is odd that two men such as Kellas and Collie should have been thus fooled; if not, it is even odder that both should have subscribed to a leg-pull in such peculiar taste.

The press report in my file, dated 30 November 1925, agrees with the report in the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, Vol. XI, No. 64, July 1926, and it has been confirmed in almost every essential by three people, all of whom, on different occasions in the lounge of Sligachan Hotel in Skye, persuaded Collie to tell them of his experience. None are known to each other. Two, who died in their eighties, I knew personally and I discussed the story with them. The third, now also deceased, was a most helpful correspondent on the subject.

Professor Norman Collie was the first Professor of Organic Chemistry at the University of London (1902–28) and a Fellow of the Royal Society. He was a native of Aberdeenshire and has been described as one of the greatest climbers of his generation. In the annals of mountaineering his name is associated with Mummery and other famous mountaineers of the day. His wide experience of mountains ranged from the Himalayas to the Caucasus, and the Alps to the Rockies, but he was far from disdaining the lesser peaks of home.

By all accounts he was a man of extreme reticence. Hamish Corrie, Walkerburn, who has been an assiduous and stimulating correspondent with a consuming interest in the Grey Man, has described him in the following words:

. . . a most striking figure and a remarkable personality; sardonic and dry as dust in manner, he did not suffer fools gladly. . . . The gaunt and ravaged face, austere and withdrawn below the battered deerstalker which he always wore . . .

is vividly recalled from their meeting at Sligachan in 1920.

Rather surprisingly, Collie confessed publicly at the 27th Annual General Meeting of the Cairngorm Club in Aberdeen in December 1925 that he had experienced the most intense fear of his lifetime while climbing alone on Ben MacDhui thirty-five years earlier . . .

I was returning from the cairn on the summit in a mist [he said] when I began to think I heard something else than merely the noise of my own footsteps. For every few steps I took I heard a crunch, and then another crunch as if someone was walking after me but taking steps three or four times the length of my own.

I said to myself, 'This is all nonsense'. I listened and heard it again but could see nothing in the mist. As I walked on and the eerie crunch, crunch, sounded behind me I was seized with terror and took to my heels, staggering blindly among the boulders for four or five miles nearly down to Rothiemurchus Forest.

Whatever you make of it I do not know, but there is something very queer about the top of Ben MacDhui and I will not go back there again by myself I know.

It has been claimed by some that Collie asserted that he saw a huge grey figure. I think, however, that it may be accepted as irrefutable that the experience, as narrated that evening, was circumscribed by sounds, and the sense of something inimical near to him only; a 'figure' did not intrude in his recital.

The sceptics have scornfully maintained that Collie's story was the result of after-dinner euphoria, and nothing more. It has also been recorded that he was unexpectedly asked to speak at a climbing club dinner in Edinburgh, and feeling annoyed that he had not received previous notice he got up and told the Grey Man experience, afterwards confessing that he had made up the story on the spur of the moment.

Those who knew the man intimately would instantly condemn this as gross vilification of his character. A study of his career and personality would probably convince the most ardent sceptic of Collie's utter sincerity, whether his story is judged to be the result of hallucination or otherwise. He was accustomed to loneliness on mountains, but he had never in his long mountaineering career experienced anything of this nature before. He was never able to arrive at any logical explanation of the uncanny 'something' which he sensed, and which caused fear to seize him by the throat. He had an intense desire to get away from the mountain, and felt no shame in confessing that he had fled from it ignominiously. It must have taken great courage for a man of Collie's asceticism thus to reveal himself in public.

The following extract is from the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, Vol. XI, No. 64, July 1926:

The publication of this story in the Press led to a flood of interviews and correspondence which continued for some weeks, the heading 'Ben MacDhui Ghost' becoming a familiar one in the newspapers. Some writers scouted the suggestion as absurd, and ascribed Professor Collie's experience to a fit of nerves; and others again described mysterious music which they had heard in the Cairngorms, and which proved to be the sound of wind rising and falling in gullies. No further light, however, was thrown upon Professor Collie's adventure, and the matter is chronicled here and left to the judgement of the individual reader.

Peter Densham, an enthusiastic and experienced mountaineer according to reports, was in charge of aeroplane rescue work in the Cairngorms during the 1939–45 war and at the end of hostilities he was employed on forestry work in Strathspey for a short period. I tried repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, to contact him in the hope that he might be able to enlarge on his experiences of the Grey Man, and clarify certain points in the stories which he related to the late J. W. Herries, a well-known journalist who, in his capacity as a representative of the Edinburgh Psychic College, interviewed Densham at Aviemore in April 1949.

I did, however, finally trace his companion in the second of the two experiences which are recorded below. This was Richard Frere, author of *Thoughts of a Mountaineer*, who said that Peter Densham had vanished from the north and his friends when he left Mr Frere's in Carrbridge in 1952, and had neither been seen nor heard of since. Frere always looked back upon the period of their friendship with nostalgic pleasure, for they had many good times and climbs together.

Densham's stories are remarkable. One morning, about the end of May 1945, he set off from Aviemore and climbed to the summit of Ben MacDhui where he arrived about midday. It was a perfectly clear day as he sat with his back to the indicator, a few yards only from the summit cairn. As so often happens in the Cairngorms, however, the mist suddenly closed in, the distant view of Ben Nevis which he had been admiring was lost to view, and he was alone with his thoughts in that eerie, silent world of stealthy mist wraiths.

He had heard many tales of the Grey Man but he had dismissed them as figments of the imagination. He scorned the influence which was supposed to drive terror-stricken climbers to the edge of the Lurcher's Crag, and over the top to their deaths. He was conscious of strange noises around him, but he attributed them to the expansion and contraction of the rocks. Unconcerned, he sat munching sandwiches hoping that the mist would soon rise:

I was eating a piece of chocolate a little later when I had the sudden impression there was someone near me – an impression which is sometimes experienced by mountaineers. I did not pay much attention to the impression knowing it was fairly common. After a little I had the impression of something cold on the top of my neck. I had the hood of my anorak down. I thought this feeling of cold was due to the air having become more moist, but I still seemed to feel a pressure on my neck. I stood up and was conscious of a crunching noise from the direction of the cairn on my left. I went forward to investigate this noise. When I got nearer to this cairn I began to think of the Grey Man and his footsteps. I thought this experience very interesting, and until within a few feet of the apparent source of the sound I was not the least frightened. Suddenly, however, I was overcome by a feeling of apprehension and after a little my overpowering wish was to get off the mountain. I found myself running at an incredible pace, and then realised that I was running in the direction of the Lurcher's Crag. I tried to stop myself and found this was extremely difficult to do. It was as if somebody was pushing me. I managed to deflect my course, but with a great deal of difficulty, and I managed to strike the direction between the left of the Lairig Ghru and Coire an Lochain. I ran down the ridge all the way to the Allt Mór Bridge, and all the way past Glenmore, and I was right on the other side of the loch before I stopped running.

On another occasion during the war he was on mountain rescue duty in the Cairngorms with his friend Richard Frere. They were searching for an aeroplane which was reported to have crashed on Braeriach. After quartering the plateau for some time without result they became convinced that the report was unfounded. Instructing the rescue party to continue the search, he and Frere descended into the Lairig Ghru pass, thence to the Ben MacDhui plateau by the March Burn.

They arrived at the wide-based cairn on MacDhui's summit at 4.00 p.m., and sat a little apart as they gazed at the near and distant range of mountains:

I was surprised after a little to hear Frere apparently talking to himself. Then I had the impression that he was talking to someone on the other side of the cairn. I went round and found myself joining in the conversation. It was a strange experience which seemed to have a psychic aspect. We talked to someone invisible for some time, and it seemed we had carried on this conversation for some little time when we suddenly realised that there was no one there but ourselves. Afterwards, neither of us, strangely, could recall the purport of this extraordinary conversation.

Peter Densham was convinced that both these experiences were fundamentally psychic, the effect on his consciousness of undefined properties of the mountain. He was frequently on the mountain after these incidents, but experienced nothing further of a psychic nature. But he always held that Ben MacDhui was a terrifying place to be on by oneself in the middle of winter. 'It is', he said, 'the most mysterious mountain I have ever been on.'

Richard Frere contributed an article to the 1948 winter number of *Open Air*, a periodical which has now ceased publication. He described at length an experience which was mainly personal and impressionistic, and possibly psychic in origin. His knowledge of the Cairngorms extended over a period of ten years, but this was the only occurrence which ever oppressed him. I discussed the matter with him at some length in 1964. His experience was a strange one.

He had climbed extensively in the Cairngorms during his stay in the area, but except on this one instance he had never experienced any apparition or particular impression beyond a sensitive appreciation of the savage beauty around him.

On this occasion, however, his mind was alive for the reception of any metaphysical phenomena that might invest the high plateau of Ben MacDhui.

As he trudged up the well-worn path through the Forest of Rothiemurchus, along the ridge high above the Allt Beinn Mór, past the scattered outposts of stunted firs, and came at last to the jaws of the high pass of Lairig Ghru, his mind dwelt on the curious tales that are inextricably woven around the great sprawling mountains whose recumbent shapes reared up on either side of the pass. Tales of slow and measured footsteps, huge, flitting shapes, and thunderous voices echoing in the chimneys of the cliffs, came to mind. Then he fell to considering how sober, scientific men had spoken with quiet conviction about the spectral apparition of the Grey Man.

He sat on a rock, back against a rib of peat, and gazed in sombre thought at the Lurcher's Crag down which fell sacrificial cascades of purest water between the shattered pillars of this high temple of decay.

Suddenly he found himself regarding a gloomy crevice on the face of the Crag, and for a moment his mind became absorbed in a train of thought so weird and disagreeable that he quickly rose and set off up the path intent upon restoring his mind to a saner balance. But the bitterest dregs of memory remained, and soon he was seized by a deep depression and a feeling of intense apathy.

His step faltered, and he wondered if he should continue. His mood was certainly not influenced by dull, leaden skies for there was nothing in this perfect day to bring anything but joy:

The bleak savagery of the Lairig's summit fastened upon me like a net. The Pools o' Dee glinted up at me from their rocky pits like angry eyes. High over my head a great bird circled and complained hoarsely of my presence. The sap seemed to have left my life, and my soul had no more significance than an old, dry carcass.

I have felt alone in the mountains and have loved it. Even in storms, with sky and mountains raving, there has been no feeling of rejection; the upland night has fastened round me like a protecting cloak. Now, however, *I was not alone*. Very close to me, permeating the air which moved so softly in the summer's wind, there was a Presence, utterly abstract but intensely real.

Crossing the shattered rocks that lie in awful confusion around the Pools I commenced to accost the steep slope down which the March Burn falls. Not for one moment did my unseen companion leave me!

High above the Pass, just below the crinkled lip over which the Burn tumbles something else became evident to my senses. I had probably been aware of it for some time, but since it appeared to hold no diabolical significance it had been pressed into the background of consciousness. Pausing to draw breath, I was struck motionless; the silence of the mountain was violated by an intensely high singing note, a sound that was just within the aural capacity, which never rose or fell. At first I attributed it to the lowered atmospheric pressure on my eardrums, but a few simple tests soon denied me this theory. The sound it seemed was coming from the very soil of the mountains.

I am not an unimaginative person by any means, but in most spheres of life I limit my imagery to flights of a very whimsical fancy; when I go to the mountains, however, logic remains behind. Two hours later at the massive cairn on MacDhui's devastated summit, the metaphysical phenomena were still with me. There was no other of my species on the hill. Certain I am though that I was not alone. The thin whine of the ethereal music still came to my ears; whether it would have been audible to others I cannot say.

Evening saw him again below the Lurcher's Crag. The music was now so faint that he could not be certain it was there at all, but the abstract Presence appeared to cling to him with some sort of desperate eagerness as if it passionately desired to leave the mountain which it haunted, but to which it was bound by something terribly strong and utterly final.

Then it was gone. A momentary flash of terror in his mind announced its departure, and he felt as he descended from the pass into the woodland paths and meadow glades of Rothiemurchus that a weight had been lifted from his soul:

Well there it is. It only happened to me once. I have been before and since; only the natural devastation of the wild mountains weighs upon me. Gather round me, enlightened materialists, and tell me that it never was; tell me that the whine was but the result of relaxed eardrums, and the Presence was only the creation of a mind that was accustomed to take too great an interest in such things. I shall not be convinced. Come, rather, with me at the mysterious dusk time when day and night struggle upon the mountains. Feel the night wind on your faces, and

hear it crying amid rocks. See the desert uplands consumed before the racing storms. Though your nerves be of steel, and your mind says it cannot be, you will be acquainted with that fear without a name, that intense dread of the unknown that has pursued mankind from the very dawn of time.

Despite the passing of forty years the experience is still very real to Richard Frere. But, oddly enough, he has no recollections of the incident at the cairn of Ben MacDhui which Peter Denshaw had reported.

In addition to what he himself had experienced, Frere told me a strange story about a friend whose identity he was not at liberty to disclose. He had no doubt that the story was genuine, or rather that his friend had experienced the phenomena through the agency of his senses, but whether they were abnormally attuned at the time must remain open to doubt.

On the strength of a wager that the cold, the loneliness, and the undefinable antagonism of the mountain would drive him from it, his friend was determined to spend a night alone beside MacDhui's huge cairn. Here he came in the shuddering cold of a January evening, made fast his tent, ate and drank a last strong cup of tea.

It started at once, he revealed later, that strange sense of the non-real, and morbidly analytical directioning of thought. Why was he there at all? He tried to concentrate on the things around him; he walls of his tent, the construction of his sleeping bag, the shape of his stove; but to no avail.

Outside lay the broken landscape, black-pitted under the moon, inert yet surging with elemental forces. He was unnaturally aware of the cold stars arched above, and his sense of utter rejection was complete. He did not feel in any way mad: the terror which possessed him concerned the imminent impact of knowledge which he knew would always set him aside from his fellows. It was as though he was the unwilling recipient of a vast range of new revolutionary thought impulses, built up in some all-powerful mind. And that mind was neither human, nor anti-human; it just had nothing to do with him at all.

Curiously he fell asleep, for his mind could stand no more. But only briefly, and when he awoke it was to fear of a more terrifying nature. His eyes were fixed and staring. His scalp prickled, and cold shivers ran up and down his spine. He tried to move his legs, but obeying a subconscious command they remained rigid:

A long stream of moonlight fell through a crack in the flysheet of the tent reflecting its pure whiteness on the far wall. He found himself looking at this place with a curious intent. Presently the edge of one side of the moonbeam began to blur brownly, and he knew that something lay between himself and the moon. At that moment he was no longer man: he became a hunted animal, forcing his body down into the earth. He thinks that his breathing stopped as an age-old instinct took over the management of his behaviour, striving for total concealment in the presence of extreme danger. But the danger, if indeed that is what it was, soon passed: the moonbeam became pure, virginal white, and the brown shadow drew away.

When all this was told to Frere soon after it happened, his friend was still in such a state of shock and so inclined to dramatise that the remainder of the story was suspect in

Frere's mind. He suggested to him that it might well have been the strain and terror to which his mind had been subjected during his first hours in the tent; a mind which was normally coldly logical, rejecting anything that did not satisfy his reason. He was not disposed to argue with Frere's suggestion, and this is what makes the rest of the story so strange. This is what he thinks, and saw:

As soon as the brown stain left the tent wall life came back into his limbs, and springing forward he dragged open the flysheet of the tent. The night was brilliant. About twenty yards away (he is curiously certain of the distance) a great brown creature was swaggering down the hill. He uses the word 'swaggering' because the creature had an air of insolent strength about it: and because it rolled slightly from side to side, taking huge measured steps. It looked as though it was covered with shortish, brown hair (yes, he asserts, most definitely brown), its head was disproportionately large, its neck very thick and powerful. By the extreme width of the shoulders compared to the relative slimness of its hips he concluded its sex to be male. No, it did not resemble an ape: its hairy arms, though long, were not unduly so, its carriage was extremely erect. All of this is highly improbable of course: but when he tells this story, which is now very seldom, he leaves the least credible part to the end. He tells us that the creature was at least twenty feet in height. And he seeks to use elementary trigonometry to prove it.

The night's experience had been so harrowing that in the morning he felt sick. Curiosity and the bright morning sunlight had dispelled his fear, but he lay in his sleeping bag resting quietly, waiting for the sickness to pass away.

As he lay there he reasoned calmly with himself, just as Frere reasoned with him later. He examined the only possible explanation: a fellow mountaineer on a night time excursion. Any sound outside the tent, heard subconsciously as he lay in shallow sleep, would have been enough to reawaken him. The thickness of the neck might well have been an illusion created by a heavy balaclava helmet over a thick sweater. That must surely be the answer. Reason was partially satisfied, but he was still unconvinced.

By this time he was fully recovered, and emerged from the tent to breathe in great draughts of the pure mountain air. Full of curiosity he walked down the slope to the point where he had seen his 'creature' disappear, and searched for footprints. The gully was bare of snow, and on the broken, rocky floor there had been no unusual disturbance. He recalled the spectacle of the oddly wagging head on great wide shoulders, the tapering waist and thick legs. But the feet had not been visible for when he had seen it the creature had been moving away beyond a huge boulder which lay in the gully.

Quickly he paced out the distance to his tent. He made it twenty-five yards, and confirmed his measurement by a second pacing. In excitement he went into the tent and knelt in the precise position in which he had first seen the creature. The boulder was clearly visible in the gully. Returning to it he stuck his ice-axe into the ground beside it and returned to the tent.

When Frere heard this for the first time they were sitting comfortably by a fire in his friend's home, and his friend was talking about the incomprehensible against a background which he understood very well. His careful, logical mind was going over the details. Frere could not see clearly where it was leading, and interrupted to say so.

‘Well,’ said his friend, ‘the whole point of my measurement was this fact. I clearly remember (he emphasised the word “clearly”) that the creature’s head was just above the horizon. The snow on those mountains was blazing in the moonlight. The head stood above them like a hump.’

‘Yes?’ I questioned, still not quite understanding.

So far his telling of this strange tale had been pointedly undramatic. He seemed deliberately to be toning down the theme drawing it out of the realm of the mystic. But now he allowed himself the luxury of a little dramatic touch.

‘When I went back to my tent for the second time,’ he said, ‘I saw the head of my ice-axe standing up above the boulder. My ice-axe is exactly 3 feet 3 inches long. I allowed 3 inches for its depth in the ground. I was fully a quarter of an hour doing the remainder of my proof.’

‘What proof?’ I asked, impressed despite myself.

‘I made a visual comparison between the length of my ice-axe and the height of the horizon. Try as I would I could not make it less than eight lengths of my axe. Twice I made it ten. So you see, my creature must have been anything between 24 and 30 feet in height. Which is exactly what I thought at the time.’

So it just rests on whether he really saw anything at all, or if his agonised mind created a monster out of all the elemental influences infesting that remote mountain. But I know that mountain well, and have seen and felt the strangest things there and I also know my friend for a prosaic and logical person. And I personally have no doubts at all.

In one of her books, *The Secret of Spey*, Wendy Wood refers to the experiences of Professor Collie and Dr Kellas, and describes her own flight in terror from the pass of Lairig Ghru. At the time she was unaware that these famous climbers had experienced moments of fear on Ben MacDhui.

It was a dull day with light snow lying as she reached the entrance to the pass. Walking had been arduous on the uneven surface with half-hidden boulders, and she was content to reach this point and proceed no further. For a little she stayed to admire the shattered cliffs of Creag an Leth-Choin, and the smoother, shadowed slopes of Sron na Lairige before retracing her footsteps.

Suddenly she heard a voice of gigantic resonance issuing close beside her. It seemed to speak with the harsh consonants and full vowels of the Gaelic, but she was too startled and frightened to attempt interpretation, or even remember the sound of the words.

She was trying to convince herself that it must be the echo of a deer’s bark when it came again from beneath her very feet, and leaving every margin for animal sounds it was impossible to convince herself that it was other than human speech. Dismayed as she was, her courage apparently did not desert her, and bringing all the logic of her mind to bear on the problem she tramped round in ever widening circles in search of someone who might conceivably be lying injured under the snow, and whose voice might have been amplified by climate and environmental conditions.

At last satisfied that she was deserting no one in distress, fear again took possession of her and she was consumed with anxiety to get away from that uncanny place. And now, as with Professor Collie, gigantic footsteps seemed to follow where no sound but that of her own hurrying footsteps had been before. She had a strange feeling that something walked immediately behind her, but she was still sufficiently in command of herself to count the seconds between the steps. It was in that moment of realisation,

when the full knowledge impressed itself upon her mind that the crunch in the snow did not coincide with her own progress, that terror overcame all precautions against injury to life and limb and, blind to her surroundings, she stumbled on regardless of everything, until the wholesome sound of a dog barking near Whitewell dragged her mind free from a world of dread to that of familiar human associations.

After all the evidence that can be gathered [she concludes], we are no nearer a reasonable solution of the identity of the huge being who is felt, seen, and heard by persons of such widely different proclivities in the same vicinity. Are such things the concretion of the imaginings of the race, clinging to a particular place, discernible only to those whose racial sensitiveness is open to receive the primal impressions and fears of a bygone day? Or is the day not bygone? Even if the Urisk has become civilised as a Highland gentleman, what is he, this spirit that scales the summit of Ben MacDhui at midnight and roams the Lairig Ghru?

In *Leaves From a Rambler's Diary*, George A. Hall relates a story told to him by a good friend whose reliability and sincerity were beyond question. The account of the strange occurrence impressed him so much at the time that later he was inclined to doubt his friend's veracity; but subsequently he had the truth of it substantiated by others.

His friend was a man whose life and work was in the hills. The high tops and corries were as familiar to him as his garden, and they claimed his presence at all hours of the day and night.

Superstition had no place in his busy life, and when he told tales of weird and unnatural happenings it was with a twinkle in his eye which belied his own belief in them.

He was on Ben MacDhui one fine clear day spying the ground and, having covered his beat, turned for home with no other thoughts than those which dwell consciously or subconsciously in the minds of men whose work lies in mountain country. As he trudged on, eyes alert to anything that stirred on the broad aprons around and before him, he suddenly felt, without being consciously aware of anything unusual, that he was not alone. Nothing was to be seen or heard, yet with every stride an inner restlessness grew stronger. His pace quickened, but he was incapable of overcoming a rising fear of that unseen but accompanying Presence. His subconscious self hammered the reality into his full consciousness, and disturbed him in a manner which was beyond his experience. Fear he had known before. This was something new and inexplicable, and he longed to get off the mountain before darkness. His pace quickened still further, and at last he was on low ground. And as silently as it had come upon him the mysterious Presence vanished.

There was no twinkle in his eye when he confessed that it had been to him a very real and weird experience, utterly beyond his comprehension.

Mr Hall never forgot the story, and some years later he was astonished to read of Professor Collie's experience.

In the course of correspondence Mr A. G. Duthie, Aberdeen, told me that throughout the years he had known a large number of climbers who were familiar with stories of

the Grey Man. Some he knew personally never looked back while descending the mountain, and he thought that women were more superstitious in this respect than men.

The poem 'Ferla Mór' which follows was written by Mr Duthie after a lone climb on Ben MacDhui during a dark November day when the mist was well down the mountain. It was an eerie experience and, for some odd reason, he felt compelled to look back more frequently than he had ever done on a mountain. He had the strange feeling that he was not alone, and the echo of his footsteps sounded sometimes uncanny, but in his case also nothing was to be seen or heard.

What is this thing
Which haunts the cold grey mists
Above MacDhui's frowning cliffs?
Is it some great phantom
Of an ageless giant
Which no man can face?
What is it that sounds
Above the echo of human footsteps
To make the climber pause! And listen
Yet fear to look back?
Is it the ghost of our inner self
Set free on some wild flight of phantasy?
No one knows
The secret is kept
In the bosom of the hills.

My old friend, the late William Marshall, a naturalist and forester of some renown, to whom this book is dedicated, had an exhaustive knowledge of the high plateaux and corries of the Cairngorms. He had, however, nothing by way of personal experience to contribute to the catalogue of strange experiences of apprehension or sheer terror. One incident only in his long experience is worth recording, simply to demonstrate that the same thing might happen to any strong, fit man after an arduous day on the hill, and need not necessarily have any supernatural significance.

I was coming home round about 1.00 a.m. along the Revoan road when my nerve suddenly gave way. It was a fine winter's night, fairly clear, and I was belting along it when it suddenly hit me. Exactly what triggered it off I don't know – maybe the call of a vixen or a wild cat, the hoot of an owl, or the bark of a roe-buck. Anyhow, I trembled. I ran whiles and walked fast, looking over my shoulder till I got home in the small hours. Then, soaked with perspiration I stripped to the buff, had a good rub down, swallowed a stiff dram and lashings of tea, and slept like a log till 7.00 a.m. To this day I don't know what happened. A doctor told me it could happen to any fit man, and he could not account for it.

Joan Grant, the author of those fascinating books, *Winged Pharoah* and *Time Out of Mind*, and a dozen more quite as absorbing, describes in *Time Out of Mind*, a terrifying experience which she had in Rothiemurchus Forest in the summer of 1928.

She was an ebullient person who appears to have had an acute psychic awareness from an early age, and, in addition, possessed the extraordinary faculty of being able to psychometrise a given object belonging to an unknown person, such as an object from

an archaeological excavation, and describe its owner and history. This facet of her character is clearly illustrated in *Time Out of Mind*, and, in conjunction with the psychic aspect, may conceivably have some bearing on her experience in Rothiemurchus.

Joan Grant's first husband was Leslie Grant, a son of A. D. Grant whose forebears were natives of the district, and who, prior to the Second World War, held the lease of Muckerach Lodge, Dulnain Bridge, from Seafield Estate. His native heath, she felt, made him even more of an autocrat, and when she first visited Muckerach the entire Grant family had been summoned to the presence, prepared to endure, even to enjoy in their fashion, the shooting season.

On one of their Sundays off she and her husband went to Rothiemurchus with the intention only of walking towards the Cairngorms. It was a glorious day of brilliant skies and blazing sunshine. They felt disinclined for much exertion and, after eating their sandwiches and sunbathing for a while beside the burn, they decided to walk on just for another mile or so and return to Aviemore for dinner.

Nothing could have been further from her mind than spooks when suddenly, for no apparent reason, she was overwhelmed with fear.

I was seized with such terror that I turned and in panic fled back along the path. Leslie ran after me, imploring me to tell him what was wrong. I could only spare breath enough to tell him to run faster, faster. Something – utterly malign, four legged, and yet obscenely human, invisible and yet solid enough for me to hear the pounding of its hooves, was trying to reach me. If it did I should die for I was far too frightened to know how to defend myself. I had run about half a mile when I burst through an invisible barrier behind which I was safe. I knew I was safe now, though a second before I had been in mortal danger; knew it as certainly as though I were a torero who has jumped the barrier in front of a charging bull.

A year later one of my Father's professors described an almost exactly similar experience he had when bug-hunting in the Cairngorms. He was a materialist, but he had been so profoundly startled that he wrote to *The Times*² – and received a letter from a reader who had also been pursued by the 'Thing'.

My curiosity was so aroused by this arresting story, so vividly told, that I eventually traced Joan Grant to Collonges, Corrèze, France, and begged for further details.

She told me that they had intended to call on the late Lt-Col Grant of Rothiemurchus, but realising when they were near Corrou, his residence, that it was too close to lunch time to be a tactful moment to drop in, they decided to walk on for a couple of miles or so and call later. In view of this it is reasonable to assume that the location of her panic was on the Lairig Ghru path, a short distance from Coylumbridge.

She is, however, unfortunately unable to throw any light on the terror which had suddenly seized her:

I wish I could give you an explanation of my panic, [she wrote], but I can only presume that I inadvertently tuned-in to an acute terror of someone who had a great deal of energy still locked up in that particular place. At that time I had not trained myself to attempt to cope with such situations. If it occurred now I should at least try to be more efficient.

It appears to be remarkable that, as far as I know, not a single experience of a psychic or supernatural nature has ever been recorded on any other mountain of the Cairngorm group but Ben MacDhui, except one which was told me in great earnestness, many years ago, by the late Tom Crowley, who was for a period president of the Moray Mountaineering Club. I had a deep suspicion at the time that my credulity was being put to the test, but my old mountaineering friend, the late Edwin Davidson, who was a close friend and associate of Crowley, assured me that Tom was utterly sincere, and that the experience had been very real to him.

Tom Crowley was one of the toughest characters I have ever known on a mountain and he was getting on in years when I climbed with him. He was tall, lean, wiry, and extremely durable. He might well, I often thought, have been the character whom John Buchan portrayed as Peter Pienaar in a number of his books. He was mountain wise, and a man whom I would not have suspected of becoming a prey to wild imaginings.

It occurred in the early 1920s on the descent from Braeriach to Glen Eanaich. Suddenly he heard footsteps behind him, and looking over his shoulder he saw a huge grey figure. He turned about and faced it for a moment before he too was seized with terror and fled from the mountain to the glen below. *And what he beheld was an undefined, misty figure with pointed ears, long legs, and feet with talons which appeared to be more like fingers than toes.*

Mountain Spectres

*In thoughts from the vision of the
night, when deep sleep falleth on men,
Fear came upon me, and trembling,
which made all my bones to shake.
Then a spirit passed before my face;
the hair of my flesh stood up:
It stood still but could not discern
the form thereof: an image was before mine eyes.*

Job IV. 13–16

And Job was a man of the desolate places.

Apparitions occupy an important place in the Grey Man study. Many of the accounts collected were, however, so transparently fictional that they have been discarded. Those which are recorded here, and the views expressed, do emanate from mountaineers of long experience and from others of undoubted integrity, but the credence given to them is a matter for the reader's own judgement.

A brief reference to a 'spectre' appeared in the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, Vol. X, No. 56, January 1921, p. 86:

Spectral Figure on the Cairngorms. 'Onlooker' who contributes 'Doings of the Week' to the 'Aberdeen Free Press', recently called attention to a myth prevalent in Upper Deeside to the effect that a big spectral figure has been seen at various times during the last five years walking about on the tops of the Cairngorms. When approached, so the story goes, the figure disappears. Moreover, it has got a name – 'Ferlie More', to wit.

The 'figure' which Richard Frere's friend claimed to have seen has been described in the previous chapter, but reports of visual experience more than one hundred years ago are on record, and the temptation to quote the refreshingly quaint prose of John Hill Burton is irresistible.

In his *The Cairngorm Mountains* (1854) he describes the approach to Ben MacDhui from the east. The scene is one of solidity and firmness, yet the variations are manifold. In which mood, he wonders, should one expect the mountain to show itself to the best advantage.

Shall it be at the dawn of a bright summer day, when the last clouds of the night have rolled themselves up to the hill-tops, and gone off into the blue sky like ships going to sea, leaving the bright sun to gaze on the glittering dew they have left upon the heather and the lichens, and to reveal to the eye every rock and crevice and little inky lake and white patch of snow with dazzling distinctness? Shall it be on the eve of the same summer day, when the sun has gone behind the hills, and their purple outlines lie softened in the edge upon a field of blazing gold, and nothing visible of crag or peak or scaur or torrent, but the whole looks warm and soft and still, as if the hills and the sky were made out of some material of the same texture – neither of them hard and rough, and neither of them untangible like the air? Or shall we take a tempestuous day, when black clouds are wandering and rummaging about in the scaurs and gulfs as if busy in the manufacture of storms letting this black precipice appear terrible in all its height, closing it up again, or revealing half of its terrors, and enhancing them by mystery, while the ear is kept in awe by strange eldritch sounds – perhaps they are the mutterings of thunder, perhaps flighty, impulsive gusts of wind, but altogether blowing as if the spirits of the air were whispering to each other about their stormy labours.

But what of the weary traveller content in the belief that he is alone in these solitudes?

. . . how will he feel, [Burton questions], if he shall discover that he has been accompanied in every step and motion by a shadowy figure of huge proportions and savage mien, flourishing in his hand a great pine-tree, in ghastly parallel with all the motions of the traveller's staff? Such are the spirits of the air haunting this howling wilderness, where the pale sheeted phantom of the burial vault or the deserted cloister would lose all his terrors and feel himself utterly insignificant. Sometimes the phantom's head is large and his body small, and then receives the name of Fahm. James Hogg has asserted, not only poetically, but in sober prose, that he was acquainted with a man who
'Beheld the fahm glide o'er the fell'.

I am bound to confess that I never had the honour of meeting with this megacephalous gentleman, nor did I ever encounter anyone who professed to have seen him, otherwise I would certainly have reported the case to the Phrenological Society.

But there is no more occasion to doubt his existence than the spectre of the Brocken.

Burton then proceeds to quote the graphic description of an experience related in the *Edinburgh Philosophical Journal* (1831) by Sir Thomas Dick Lauder who, along with Mr Grant of Ballindalloch, had ascended Ben MacDhui and witnessed the phenomenon known as the 'Spectre of the Brocken', which is described in the next chapter.

The quotation which Burton uses is from the Ettrick Shepherd's poem 'Glen Avin':

GLEN AVIN

James Hogg

Beyond the grizzly cliffs which guard
The infant rills of Highland Dee,
Where hunter's horn was never heard,
Nor bugle of the forest bee.

'Mid wastes that dorn and dreary lie,
One mountain rears his mighty form.
Disturbs the moon in passing bye,
And smiles above the thunderstorm.

An hoary sage once lingered there,
Intent to prove some mystic scene;
Though cavern deep, and forest sere,
Had whooped November's boisterous reign.

Oft had that seer, at break of morn,
Beheld the *fahm* glide o'er the fell;
And 'neath the new moon's silver horn,
The fairies dancing in the dell:

Had seen the spirits of the Glen,
In every form that Ossian knew;
And wailings heard for living man,
Were never more the light to view.

But ah! that dull foreboding day,
He saw what mortal could not bear;
A sight that scared the erne away,
And drove the wild deer from his lair.

Firm in his magic ring he stood,
When lo! aloft on grey Cairngorm,
A form appeared that chilled his blood, –
The giant Spirit of the Storm.

His face was like the spectre wan,
Slow gliding from the midnight isle;
His stature on the nightly plan
Of smoke tower o'er the burning pile.

Red, red and grisly were his eyes;
His cap the moon-cloud's silver grey;
His staff the writhed snake, that lies
Pale, bending o'er the milky way.

When from the dark and sedgy dells
Come eldritch cries of wildered men.
Or wind-harp at thy window swells,
Beware the sprite of Avin-Glen!

Hogg undoubtedly climbed Ben MacDhui, probably in the course of his second highland journey, and almost certainly slept at the Shelter Stone, for he discoursed at some length on Loch A'an and had a bitter argument with Burton about its length. His views on the subject were, indeed, a sort of gauge of the Shepherd's spirits. At one moment he would reiterate that it exceeded twenty miles, the next appeared to be in some doubt; when he was in high spirits he would not abate one inch of the thirty! But despite Burton's assertion no reference to the Grey Man has been found in the Shepherd's prose. Dr A. M. Kellas, referred to by some writers as 'Julius' Kellas, who died tragically during the journey through Tibet of the 1921–22 first Mount Everest (Reconnaissance) Expedition, and was buried within sight of Everest, was one of the most widely experienced mountaineers of his time. When Professor Collie confided in him the terror

which he had experienced twelve years previously, he was astonished to learn that Dr Kellas also had a strange experience to relate.

Unfortunately Kellas, who was then lecturer in Chemistry in the Medical School of the Middlesex Hospital, does not appear to have recorded the experience himself, and like others it has suffered from frequent repetition. The version which is most frequently recounted is that on a clear June night, after having spent a considerable time chipping for crystals below the cairn, he was on the summit of Ben MacDhui with his brother, who sat by the cairn while he rested a little way from it. Suddenly he observed a figure climb up out of the Lairig Ghru pass, wander round the cairn, and disappear again into the pass. In those days it would have been rather surprising to find anyone alone on Ben MacDhui at such a late hour, but what astonished Kellas was the size of the figure, which was practically the same height as the ten-foot cairn. He was even more astonished when he rejoined his brother.

‘Who on earth was that man walking round the cairn?’ he asked.

Equally surprised, his brother replied that he had seen no one.

Another version is that Dr Kellas was on Ben MacDhui with a party in the daytime. While one or two rested by the cairn, Dr Kellas and others carried on downhill to have a look into the Lairig Ghru pass, and it was on their return to the cairn that the huge figure was observed.

Perhaps the version upon which most credence can be placed is that related by W. G. Robertson in a letter to the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* in December 1925.

The correspondence in your paper on the subject of the Ferla Móhr has encouraged me to state the story as given to me by the late Mr Henry Kellas, my lifelong friend, with whom I once climbed Ben MacDhui.

He and his brother, Dr Kellas, had been chipping for crystals in the late afternoon well below the cairn, and were together on the slope of a fold of the hill. Suddenly they became aware of a giant figure coming down towards them from the cairn. They saw it pass out of sight in the dip on the side of the fold remote from themselves, and awaited its reappearance. But fear possessed them ere it did reach the top, and they fled. They were aware it was following them, and tore down by Corrie Etchachan to escape it.

Mr Kellas said there was a mist on part of the hill, but refused to believe that the figure could be the shadow of either his brother or himself, causing an optical illusion. He asked why not *two* figures if that had been the case. But he never spoke of ‘crunching’ or of footsteps being *heard* by either himself or his brother.

No one who knew Mr Kellas or heard him relate his story could doubt this complete faith in his experience. It would be interesting to know if this experience could be explained similarly to that of the Spectre of the Brocken. Though I have twice climbed the hill I have not had the luck to see the spectre.

The story was told some years later to an old man in Rothiemurchus who knew the Cairngorms well. He was unimpressed.

‘Och aye,’ he remarked simply, ‘that would have been the Fear Liath Mór he would have been seeing.’

The late George Duncan, a well-known Aberdeen advocate, Hon. Sheriff-Substitute of Aberdeen, and Chairman of the Education Committee, was a veteran mountaineer who had a wide knowledge of the Cairngorms. He related in a letter to *The Scotsman* in

1941 a puzzling experience which he himself had after coming off the mountains about the year 1914.

He had been climbing with a fellow member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club one September, and had arrived back at Derry Lodge in the evening. As they drove down the Derry road in a dog-cart in the dusk Mr Duncan was in the back seat facing the mountains.

All at once, [he said], I got the shock of my life by seeing before me a tall figure in a black robe – the conventional figure of the Devil himself, waving his arms, clad in long depending sleeves, towards me. I got such a shock that I felt what I have never felt before or since, a cold shiver running down my spine. In a minute or two the dog-cart turned a corner and the figure passed from view. Afterwards my friend asked me why I had so suddenly become silent (we were in the middle of a conversation), and I told him what I had seen.

I have often visited the spot since in the endeavour to locate trees, the waving branches of which might have explained the experience, but without any satisfactory result.

This account varies from a press report in 1926 in one particular only. Mr Duncan then described the figure which he ‘seemed to see’ as being ‘surrounded with smoke’.

The story is substantiated by the late James A. Parker, another well-known mountaineer in his day, in the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, Vol. VIII, No. 47, July 1916.

The view from the top of the Devil’s Point looking down into Glen Dee is very impressive and not suited for giddy people. Seen from near the top the south-east corner of the hill appears to be fairly broken up, and it is possible that the descent would not be very difficult; but, of course, appearances from above are deceptive, as one only sees ledges and does not see the pitches. After we had rested some little time on the top we decided to descend by the much easier route across the scree slope to the north-west of the summit, and down the path in the corrie to the bothy. The scree slope is quite a simple one and is set at a very moderate angle, but in crossing it each of us in turn stumbled rather badly, and on occasion I actually fell. I would not like to go as far as to say that I was tripped up, but there is no getting over the fact that a moderately-sized stone got between my feet in some mysterious manner, and that I came a cropper in consequence. I did not attach any importance to the incident at the time, nor afterwards to the fact that when driving back from Derry Lodge to Braemar in the dog-cart Duncan, who occupied the back seat, was strangely silent the whole way. It was only at dinner that evening he told me that when we were about a mile below Derry Lodge he had looked up to the hill-side on his right and had seen the Devil about a quarter of a mile away waving his arms to him! What it was that Duncan actually saw we cannot tell now, although we have both driven over the same road since then, and kept our eyes glued to the hill-side in hope of seeing His Majesty, but failed to see anything that could even suggest him. Yet Duncan must have seen something, as he was so scared that he did not speak for half an hour afterwards, and had not the presence of mind to stop the trap so that the driver and I might see the gentleman for ourselves. It is possible that the wearing of a light pair of boots is not the true explanation of his remarkably speedy retreat from the Devil’s Point, and that the real reason is too awful a nature to be divulged even now!

The late Walter Reid who also had an intimate knowledge of the Cairngorms said in 1926 to a newspaper reporter that he knew two mountaineers who claimed to have encountered the Devil on the descent of Ben MacDhui.

On 2 October 1941, *The Scotsman* quoted the following curious experience from *The Mountain Vision* by the late Frank S. Smythe who was one of the greatest mountaineers of this century. It prompted a letter to the Editor from the author and a volume of

correspondence ensued. Because of the relevance of some of the letters to the Ben MacDhui phenomenon they are worth quoting.

Smythe had experienced many puzzling incidents on mountains, but the strangest of all was in the Highlands when he was crossing the hills from Morvich to Loch Duich on a bright sunny day. The panorama of cloud-dappled hills, and the distant blue of the sea contained nothing of a sinister nature, yet as he crossed the ridge before dropping into Glen Glomach and entered a grassy, sun-warmed defile, he became instantly aware of an aura of evil in that place. It was as if something terrible had once happened there, and time had failed to dissipate the atmosphere created by it.

His reaction to the place interested him. On an impulse he decided to have lunch there, and attempt to fathom the feeling of disenchantment which oppressed him. As he reclined, drowsily smoking his pipe, the atmosphere in the defile seemed to press in on him with increasing force. He strove to keep his mind free of all thought so that it might be receptive to whatever strange influence surrounded him, and this is what he saw, or as the sceptical reader will say, what he imagined he saw.

A score or more of ragged people, men, women and children, were straggling through the defile. They appeared very weary, as though they had come a long way. The pitiful procession was in the midst of the defile when all of a sudden from either side concealed men leapt to their feet and, brandishing spears, axes and clubs, rushed down with wild yells on the unfortunates beneath. There was a short fierce struggle, then a horrible massacre. Not one man, woman or child was left alive; the defile was choked with corpses.

I got out of the place as quickly as I could. Screams seemed to din my ears as I hastened down the broad heather slopes into Glen Glomach. I am not a superstitious person, but it seemed to me that I was vouchsafed a backward glimpse into a bloodstained page of Highland history. I know nothing about the history of that part of Scotland and should be grateful for any information throwing light on what I still believe was a genuine psychical experience.

Extract from Smythe's letter to the Editor:

In connection with my curious experience which you quoted from my book *The Mountain Vision*, in your issue of October 2nd (I must thank you for a most generous review) it may be of interest that, as I have recently learned, a massacre did take place on the road between Morvich and Glen Glomach either in 1715, when General Wade laid an ambush and slaughtered a number of Highlanders, or in 1745–46 after Culloden. . . . I doubt, however, whether my experience had anything to do with this, as the venue was on the ridge between Morvich and Glen Glomach, not on the road; also the weapons I saw, or seemed to see, were those of an earlier date.

Mr Smythe then referred to Professor Collie's experience on Ben MacDhui.

Marsali Ross. 20 October 1941.

With reference to Mr Frank Smythe's letter of 14th October, I append a few notes on An Ferla Mhór (The Big Grey Man) – otherwise known as The Spectre of Ben MacDhui – which may be of interest to your readers. This spirit always heralds its approach in the same manner. A noise of something other than the sound of his own footsteps in the snow is heard by the traveller, who for every few steps he takes hears a loud crunch and then another crunch, as if someone were walking after him, but taking steps three or four times the length of his own. Peering fearfully through the mist, he sees a figure about ten feet in height descending into the Lairig. As it would be most unlikely for a human being (of any height!) to be wandering alone so often on the top of Ben MacDhui at midnight, it is little wonder that this frequently experienced phenomenon has been given a supernatural significance.

Miss Ross refers briefly to the Spectre of The Brocken and concludes:

Whether An Ferla Mhór is likewise a figure born of the mist, or distilled out of the mountain dew, is doubtful. Strange things happen amid the mountain solitudes.
'Where nought is heard except the wild wind's sigh,
Or savage raven's deep and hollow cry.'

Seton Gordon. 25 October 1941.

Seton Gordon, the renowned ornithologist and naturalist, author of *The Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland* and other works, knew the Cairngorms with a degree of intimacy possessed by few, and at one time interested himself sufficiently in the Grey Man phenomenon to make enquiries locally. We had, over the years, some correspondence on the Grey Man.

In his letter to *The Scotsman* he wrote:

There was, I believe, a tradition among some of the old people who lived beneath the Cairngorms that a ghost at times was seen on the Ben MacDhui-Cairngorm plateau. This ghost they named Am Fear Liath Mór, the Big Grey Man, and it was believed that the spectre was the ghost of Uilleam Ruighe Naomhe, William Smith, the Cairngorm poet, whose song 'Allt an Lochain Uaine', is still sung in the district.

One of the people of the district who saw the spectre told me that the day was cold and stormy, with snow squalls. As the narrator of the event was crossing the plateau to Coire an t-Sneachda a man of a greyish complexion was seen to be following and, although the day was bitterly cold, he was in his shirt sleeves with no coat on him. When the edge of the corrie was reached, the mysterious figure disappeared. There was nothing disquieting in this apparition except the strangeness of his dress on that snowy day, and his sudden, uncanny disappearance . . .

Wendy Wood. 5 November 1941.

I have been very interested in the correspondence covering Ferla Mór, having had my own experience with something apparently supernatural in the Lairig Ghru. I seem to be the only person who heard a voice as well as the footsteps, and I recount it as written in my book, *The Secret of Spey*, and as I broadcast it last year, because the description was written within a day of the occurrence. I did not know at the time of the adventures of Dr Kellas or Dr Collie, though I mention them in the book with a discursive passage on the phenomena.

Miss Wood goes on to describe her experience which has already been recounted in the first chapter. Her letter concludes:

I would suggest that the evidence regarding this strange spectre should be collected and, if those who shared the experience, and any others who have further evidence to offer, would correspond with me, I would be pleased to gather the material into booklet form for publication.

Evelyn S. Lloyd. 5 November 1941.

I shall be very interested to know, after reading the curious experiences recorded by those who have seen and heard the mountain spectres of Scotland, if anyone knows of a sight similar to that which I saw about five years ago, walking along the track between the Elgol road and the main Portree one, which passed through the little village of Luib. The track follows the valley all the way, with Blaven behind on the left, and the flank of the Red Cuillin Ben na Cro on the right. I was alone, on a dull sunless afternoon in April. I had glasses. My eyes suddenly were caught

by a moving form high up on the bare hillside; it was plain and distinct for several seconds – a giant man moving steadily towards me, like an old-time shepherd with a bonnet and plaid hanging down over his shoulder. He stopped and stood, turning to look around, and leaning on his crook. I had time to think ‘Who can that be?’ and also that it was impossibly large to be real. Then I used the glasses and could see nothing but the granite hillside. I looked without them and there was nothing left, and I could see no trace of any form or shadow. The sky being wholly overcast ruled out any possible cloud effect. It inspired no alarm, but considerable surprise, as it was convincingly there for those few seconds, and equally convincingly gone in a moment. That unmistakably clad shepherd, who was he?

In the June 1958 issue of *The Scots Magazine*, Alexander Tewnion, a mountaineer of considerable experience, naturalist and photographer, described an encounter with the Grey Man.

It was the most outstanding experience of his mountaineering life. That was the day he shot the Fear Liath Mór.

In October 1943 he spent ten days’ leave climbing alone in the Cairngorms and, as rations were in short supply, he carried a revolver to shoot any small game that might present itself for the pot.

One afternoon as he reached the summit of Ben MacDhui dense mist swept across the Lairig Ghru and enveloped the mountain. The atmosphere became dark and gloomy, and the wind rose. Fearing a storm he retreated down the Coire Etchachan path. He was swinging along at a rapid pace when an odd sound, like a loud footstep, echoed through the mist. Then another, and another, and they were spaced at long intervals:

I am not unduly imaginative, but my thoughts flashed instantly to the well-known story of Professor Collie and Fear Liath Mór. Then I felt the reassuring weight of the loaded revolver in my pocket. Grasping the butt, I peered about in the mist here rent and tattered by eddies of wind. A strange shape loomed up, receded, came charging at me! Without hesitation I whipped out the revolver and fired three times at the figure. When it still came on I turned and hared down the path, reaching Glen Derry in a time I have never bettered.

You may ask, was it really the Fear Liath Mór? Frankly, I think it was. Many times since then I have traversed MacDhui in mist, bivouacked on it in the open, camped near its summit for days on end on different occasions – often alone, and always with an easy mind. For on that day I am convinced I shot the only Fear Liath Mór my imagination will ever see.

I was first ‘introduced’ to that enduring Dundee warrior, Sydney Scroggie, on Eamonn Andrews’s immensely popular weekly series, ‘This is Your Life’. Despite grievous injuries and total blindness as a result of being blown up by a land mine in the last world war, Sydney has not allowed this to deter him from seeking the high tops and roughing it with the best. For years he might be seen any day, thumbstick in hand, striding eagerly uphill from his place of business on the Kingsway to the Birky Inn at Muirhead for his daily pint of heavy and yarn with the boys, ‘You meet them there by arrangement, by habitually coinciding with them, or just plain out of the blue.’ Like his friend, the Commander, for example, who got blown up like himself and ‘has never been exactly the same since’, and who in the laconic way conventional in the ward room says: ‘Somebody dropped something, and the tops of my legs finished up under my armpits.’

Sydney's experience was at the Shelter Stone in 1942 when he was stationed at Aviemore with the 52nd Lowland Division on a course designed to weld them into the first British mountain troops. He described the Division briefly in the narrative which he sent to me as, 'Skis, boots, anoraks, horses, mules, and blaspheming infantrymen'. The evenings and occasional days were free, and, while the rest amused themselves according to their tastes, he pedalled into the Rothiemurchus Forest on an Army push-bike and explored the Cairngorms from that side. He saw many unforgettable scenes in the course of these solitary expeditions:

At sunset on top of Braeriach a high mackerel sky turned all to wisps of fire so that the whole bouldery wilderness glowed with reflected redness. Again, on the top of MacDhui the cloud lifted to reveal a landscape shot with such brilliance of variegated colour that it had all the appearance of a Russel Flint fantastically exaggerated. Cairn Toul was emerald green, Braeriach a deep violet and all the distant hills glorious in soft browns and greens, blues and gold. Descending from the Lairig on the way back I saw the Lurcher's Crag chocolate-brown, jungle-green and bright gold in the rays of the setting sun, and then, the cloud descending on the whole massif, and the sun a lurid ball on the horizon, all that cloud flushed to a deep blood-red before fading at last into cold grey.

One particular day he descended from the high plateau to the Shelter Stone by the Garbh Uisge. As he reached its headwaters and gazed down on Loch A'an, lying like a crucible of quicksilver in the valley 2000 feet below, the afternoon was far advanced. Except for the croak of a ptarmigan, the noise of running water, the moss, gravel, turf and rocks, he was utterly alone in that fascinating wilderness, and by the time he had reached the Shelter Stone, built a fire of heather and eaten his meal, it was gloaming verging on twilight.

I sat outside in the stillness, smoking and watching the night silently and imperceptibly gather in the wilderness of Glen A'an. Below me and at some little distance, as you know, lay the upper end of the loch, its waters gleaming amongst the shadows in the last of the light. Suddenly I saw a figure, a tall, stately, human figure, appear out of the blackness on one side of the loch, and clearly silhouetted against the water pace with long, deliberate steps across the combined burns just where they enter the loch. Whoever he was, the figure had no rucksack on his back and shortly merged with the corresponding blackness on the other side of the loch. It is marvellous how quickly you can move over rough ground even at night, and in no time I had deftly made my way from the Stone to the spit of gravel and sand which the figure had crossed. There were no footprints that I could see, no evidence as to which way my visitor had gone, and I went along through the heather and boulders of the lochside shouting to give notice that I was there. There was no reply and suddenly, as the echo of my last shout came ringing back, I became uneasily aware of the darkness, the silence, and as it were, the brooding eyes of the Cairngorms watching me. The hair stirred on the back of my neck, I turned about, and more in flight than in retreat regained the reassuring solidity of the Stone. Naturally I like to think that I was privileged on that eerie occasion to witness the Big Grey Man on one of his evening perambulations, but my credulity is tempered with a certain consideration which I set before you now. It was wartime and, as you know, Norwegians were at this period stationed at Glenmore Lodge. Had it been one of these, however, my shouts would have been answered. In the hills no one would disregard a cry which might until proved otherwise denote some calamity or other. What, on the other hand, if it had been a German agent parachuted into the Cairngorms for the sinister purpose of the Third Reich? The same wild country which drew me evening after evening from the camp was well adapted to that kind of thing. Except for a bullet or a knife in the back no amount of shouting would have elicited a response from that class of visitor. Big Grey Man, therefore, or big, grey-clad infantryman, I leave you to make up your mind.

Mrs Catherine Allan, Dundee, whom I have been unable to trace, gave me permission after reading the first edition to quote her curious experience at the head of Loch A'an, almost at the same spot as Sydney Scroggie had seen the figure just described:

My late husband – a Strathspey man – his sister, her husband and I had spent the day walking and climbing in the Cairngorms and were to spend the night near the Shelter Stone. We spread our sleeping bags on a slope of heather, about two yards from the narrow shingle beach at the end of Loch A'an. There was a bright, full moon making the magnificent scenery almost as bright as day. There was no wind, no sound, and we hadn't seen another living creature all day. It was intensely cold. I was awake, and so was my brother-in-law looking at the wonderful sight, when we heard footsteps, crisp and clear, coming along the shingle, only two yards away. We sat up to see who it could be, and saw nothing at all, but could follow the steps with our eyes so to speak, until they just died away. To each other we said in whispers 'What on earth was that?'. We hadn't heard then of the Grey Man. One wonders.

In the first edition of the Big Grey Man's 'biography' I treated the subject as objectively as possible, but I have been persuaded to include in this edition a strange personal experience in the Corroul bothy which, after about sixty years, remains as much an unsolved mystery as when it occurred.

One August night in 1932 I was alone in the bothy. I had come through the Lairig Ghru pass that morning in drenching drizzle. At the foot of Creag an Leth Choin I had met two men who had been staying for a few days in the Corroul bothy. They were bound for Aviemore to replenish their dwindling food supplies, but had every intention of returning to the bothy that night. In the course of conversation I said that it had been my intention to stay in a cave on the south-west side of the Devil's Point, but as that entailed climbing up steep boiler plates it could be a risky exercise with a heavy load in wet conditions, and if the weather did not improve they might find me in the bothy when they returned.

When I reached Corroul I was soaked through and as the weather showed no inclination to improve I decided to stay. After a hard day's work rooting for bogwood, hauling the relics of the primeval forest to the bothy and smashing them up into smaller pieces by laying them between two boulders and crashing down on them with the heaviest rock I could lift, I went inside and cooked myself a meal – probably a large pan of brose and a hunk of bread. Dusk was falling as I reclined in the ancient home-made armchair in front of a roaring fire, feet against the warm chimney breast, a pipeful of strong bogie roll pulling sweetly. By this time I felt sure that my acquaintances of the morning had decided to stay on the Aviemore side overnight.

At this point I should explain that the outer door of the bothy was fitted with a metal locking bar swinging on a pivot on the outside of the door. On either door post there were keepers into which the locking bar swung when the door was barred. In those days an inner door led into the living chamber.

That night as I dozed in front of the fire the inner door was closed but the outer one was wide open. Suddenly I heard it close and the bar swing into the keepers. Curious, I went to investigate and found the door tightly barred. The only means of getting out was by squeezing through the small, hinged window. When I jumped out and looked around, not

a living thing stirred. It was deadly quiet, except for the murmur of the Dee below, the prattle of a nearby burn, and the susurrations of a light breeze rippling through the heather. But I felt so convinced that someone was playing tricks on me that I searched the peat hags and the rocks behind the bothy until I felt thoroughly satisfied that neither man nor beast was anywhere in the vicinity. I was puzzled and thoughtful, but not particularly perturbed. I said to myself ‘Ach fuich!’ and went in again having come to the simple conclusion that a sudden gust of wind had slammed the door, and the impact had created sufficient momentum for the pendulum-like bar to swing into place. That satisfied my reason for the moment, but I still cannot explain today my action in re-entering the bothy by the window instead of by the door. The only possible explanation I can give is that it was prompted by some unrecognised primitive fear. But very real fear I was to know without much more delay.

The darkness of an August night had now fallen and I lay down on my heather bed to sleep. Just as I was dropping off I was startled into wide-awake consciousness by the sound of my name like a long drawn out whisper – ‘Affleck Gra-a-a-ay’. It came again and I knew unnameable fear. My scalp prickled, and cold shivers ran up and down my spine. I pressed my body into the bedding like a hunted animal, eyes fixed and staring in the darkness. It came again – ‘Affleck Gra-a-a-ay’. Then life came back into my limbs, and I became curiously calm. I knew what it was. Rising I lit a candle, and held it out of the window. In a moment I received an answering flicker from up the pass, and throwing on my kilt and boots I was out through the window again. But before I set off to stumble over the peat hags in the direction of the distress signal I unbarred the door. I did not mean to say anything about my experience. It was, as I had surmised, the two men I had met earlier in the day. One had twisted his ankle, and the other was in a state of distress with cramp. I helped them back to the bothy, and after some crude treatment with cold water compresses, and lashings of hot tea they were soon in better shape.

As for the barring of the door I am still after more than sixty years puzzled, and no nearer any logical explanation because the gust of wind theory proved to be untenable. Every time I visited the bothy since that night I tried in every conceivable way to make the door slam and bar itself, but without success. Is one to conclude then that it was all due to the machinations of the Big Grey Man, the Fear Liath Mór of Ben MacDhui? It is a good enough explanation for some perhaps, but not for me.

The Spectre of the Brocken

The grey shadow which has so frequently been observed in the Cairngorms has sometimes been postulated as the only logical explanation of the Grey Man. This phenomenon is, however, a very simple one which was first observed on the Brocken, the highest summit of the Harz Mountains in Germany. The Brocken holds an important place in the folklore of North Germany where pagan worship lingered long after the introduction of Christianity. Annually, on Walpurgis Night, the witches rode on broom sticks and he-goats to the ancient places of worship where they held high revels with their master, the Devil, and one of those places was The Brocken.

It used to be, perhaps still is, the custom for Goethe devotees to make an annual pilgrimage on 'Walpurgisnacht', 1 May, to the Brocken. They carried besoms, symbols of witchcraft revelry – as in Burns' 'Tam o' Shanter' – and occult magic. From the summit they would watch the sun rise over the German plains, hills and forests:

*Die Hexen zu dem Brocken ziehn,
Die Stoppel ist gelb, die Saat ist grün,
Dort Sammelt sich der grosse Hauf,
Herr Urian sitzt oben auf,
So geht es über stein und Stock.*

Goethe.

It was indeed from Burns that the great German poet received his inspiration for the 'Walpurgisnacht' scene in 'Faust'.

But the Brocken is also famous for the phenomenon called 'The Spectre of The Brocken', which is simply the shadow of the observer thrown by a low sun against an opaque wall of mist. The result is that the shadow is magnified enormously, and is sometimes distorted to the most grotesque forms, depending on the effect of wind and the observer's own movements. Occasionally the shadow is surrounded by beautiful bows of bright prismatic colours, sometimes called 'the glory', which, under these circumstances, is simply the chromatic fringe developed by diffraction at the margin of the dark shadow. The so-called 'fog image' of the Rigi Kulm in Switzerland is essentially of the same nature. The spectacle is startling until the observer becomes aware that he is simply looking at his own image.

James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, in his tales describes a fearful experience about the year 1791.

At the age of about nineteen he was ascending a hillside towards the ewe-buchts one summer morning when the valleys were filled with a dense white mist, and the hill tops were bathed in sunshine. As so often happens when approaching the sunshine out of the mist a halo was thrown around him, and for a little he was lost in wonder and admiration at this strange phenomenon. Then he became conscious that a figure had intruded in his reverie. It was a huge, dark semblance of a human figure standing a short distance from him, bearing a strong resemblance in his racing imagination to the enemy of mankind.

Terror-stricken he ran from the spot, and never stopped until he was safe among the ewe-milkers. All that day he felt ill at ease, but fearing mockery he told no one. The next day he had to make the same journey and he was determined, if conditions were similar, to take his courage in both hands and put the phenomenon fairly to the proof.

The fog was even denser as he climbed upwards, and the sun as it rose more brilliant than the day before. The halo was again thrown round him, and at length he reached the haunted spot:

. . . at the very place there arose the same terrible apparition which had frightened me so much the morning before. It was a giant blackamoor, at least thirty feet high, and equally proportioned, and very near me. I was actually struck powerless with astonishment and terror. My first resolution was, if I could keep the power of my limbs, to run home and hide myself below the blankets with the Bible beneath my head. But then again, I thought it was hard to let my master's 700 ewes go wild for fear of the de'il. In this perplexity (and I rather think I was crying) I took off my bonnet, and scratched my head bitterly with both hands; when, to my astonishment and delight, the de'il also took off his bonnet and scratched his head with both hands – but in such a style: oh, there's no man can describe it! His arms and his fingers were like trees and branches without leaves. I laughed at him till I actually fell down upon the sward; the de'il also fell down and laughed at me. I then noted for the first time that he had two collie dogs at his foot, bigger than buffaloes. I arose, and made him a most graceful bow, which he returned at the same moment – but such a bow for awkwardness I never saw! It was as if the Tron Kirk steeple had bowed to me. I turned my cheek to the sun as well as I could, that I might see the de'il's profile properly defined in the cloud. It was capital! His nose was about half a yard long, and his face at least three yards; and then he was gaping and laughing so, that one would have thought he might have swallowed the biggest man in the country.

It was quite a scene of enchantment. I could not leave it. On going five or six steps forward, it vanished; but, on returning to the same spot, there he stood, and I could cause him to make a fool of himself as much as I liked; but always as the sun rose higher, he grew shorter, so that, I think, could I have staid, he might have come into a respectable size of a de'il at the last.

Several times afterwards he witnessed the spectacle, but never to such a degree of definition as on his first two experiences. Twenty-one years subsequently he was delighted to read a note, taken from the diary of a Mr Hawe, and translated from a German paper concerning the 'Bogle of the Brocken':

Having ascended the Brocken for the thirtieth time, I was at length so fortunate as to have the pleasure of seeing the phenomenon. The sun rose about four o'clock and the atmosphere being quite serene towards the East, his rays could pass without any obstruction over the Heinrichshohe. In the South West, however, a brisk wind carried before it thin transparent vapours. About a quarter-past-four, I looked round to see if the atmosphere would permit me to

have a free prospect to the South West, when I observed, at a very great distance, a human figure, of a monstrous size. A violent gust of wind having nearly carried away my hat, I clapped my hand to it, by moving my hand towards my head, and the colossal figure did the same, on which the pleasure I felt cannot be described; for I had made already many a weary step in the hopes of seeing this shadowy image, without being able to gratify my curiosity.

I then called the landlord of the Brocken (the neighbouring inn), and having both taken the same position which I had taken alone, we looked, but saw nothing. We had not, however, stood long, when two such colossal figures were formed over the above eminence. We retained our position, kept our eyes fixed on the same spot, and in a little time the two figures again stood before us, and were joined by a third. Every movement that we made these figures imitated, but with this difference, that the phenomenon was sometimes weak, and faintly defined, and sometimes strong and dark.

Hogg also recalls other strange sights he encountered among the hills. One of the most curious happened one morning in April 1785 when he was gathering ewes on the Moor Brae of Berry Knowe and the sun was just above the horizon. He noticed with astonishment that he had two shadows. He looked immediately to the east expecting to see both sun and a mock sun, but there was only the real sun rising higher and higher above the horizon:

Yet there was I going to a certainty with two shadows – the one upright, and well defined, and the other tall, dim, and leaning backward, something like a very tall awkward servant waiting upon and walking behind a little spruce master. The tall one soon vanished, as I turned the hill into a glen called Carsen's Cleuch; but I never forgot the circumstances; and after I became an old man, I visited the very spot, as nearly as I could remember, again and again, thinking that the reflection of the sun from some pool or lake which I had not perceived, might have caused it; but there was no such thing.

I never mentioned the circumstances to any living being before, save to Sir D Brewster, who, of all men I ever met with, is the fondest of investigating everything relating to natural phenomena: he pretended to account for it by some law of dioptrical refraction, which I did not understand.

Stranger still, although he feared it would hardly procure credit, yet it was the truth on the word of an honest man, he once saw about two hundred natural apparitions at one time, and all together.

One fine summer morning as he was coming along the Hawshaw rigg of Blackhouse he noticed in a little glen called Brakehope, on the other side of Douglas Burn, a whole drove of Highland cattle, numbering, he thought, about ten score, and accompanied by three drovers. He saw them distinctly; red ones, black ones, white faces, and spotted ones.

They were feeding on each side of the Brakehope burn as they moved, and as they were quite off the drove road he thought for a moment of crossing and challenging the drovers. But he was hungry and in need of his breakfast, so he hastened home and sent Robert Borthwick, the shepherd who was in charge of that section of the farm, to drive them off his best land. He was accompanied by William and George Laidlaw, all armed with stout cudgels, and in high chagrin.

Soon they returned, and poor James was subjected to a stream of abuse and accused of being little better than a romancer. Not a sign of cattle, hoofmarks, drovers, dogs or

even sheep was to be found in Brakehope that day, nor on enquiry round the neighbours did they find any evidence of a drove of cattle anywhere in the district at that time.

But the shepherd was confident that he was neither a dreamer nor a seer of visions. He was in robust health and spirits, and he was either chanting a song to himself, or else composing one in his mind, when he first came in view of the drove. It was between eight and nine on a fine summer morning of mingled cloud and sunshine. He was barely three quarters of a mile from it, and no man, he claimed, ever had sharper eyesight than he.

It would therefore appear that my vision of a drove of Highland cattle, with their drivers, was not altogether an isolated instance of the same phenomena. It is quite evident that we must attribute these appearances to particular states of the atmosphere, and suppose them to be shadows of realities; the airy resemblance of scenes passing in distant parts of the country, and by some singular operation of natural causes thus expressively imaged in the acclivities of the mountains.

The late Professor C. T. R. Wilson was a distinguished physicist and Nobel prize-winner, and the last of a remarkable band of physicists working in the Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge, at the turn of the century. His holidays were usually spent climbing on Scottish mountains which he came to know intimately. Indeed, two experiences of The Spectre of the Brocken on Ben Nevis determined the direction of his scientific work. When he was serving as temporary observer at the Meteorological Observatory on Ben Nevis in 1894, he was so impressed by ‘the glory’ surrounding his shadow as he stood on the edge of the precipice overlooking the great corrie, that he decided to investigate the formation of the coloured rings experimentally. He produced the cloud necessary for the reproduction of ‘the glory’ by expanding moist air in a closed glass chamber, but purely by accident he discovered a peculiarity in the process of condensation which led him away from his original intention to another line of research. He was to show that ions served as nuclei for condensation, and after years of painstaking work the first Wilson cloud chamber was operated in 1911 with a success which astonished even its creator. This instrument with some adaptation was to provide photographs giving an almost complete record of the development of nuclear and cosmic ray physics during the ensuing thirty years.

The finest photographic example I have ever seen of ‘the glory’ is a coloured transparency taken by Tom Weir on the Buachaille Etive Mór. There is also an excellent photograph in W. H. Murray’s *Undiscovered Scotland* taken on Liathach in Wester Ross.

Balmoral Castle. Its Past and Present History was written by the late Dr John Stirton who was, for many years, senior minister of Crathie and chaplain to the king. It was typed and bound for private circulation only in 1940. One was presented to the late William Brown who was headmaster of Crathie School from 1901 to 1947, and through the kindness of his daughter, Mrs Iain Grant, Inverey, I had the privilege of reading it.

Balmoral Castle was originally the residence of Sir Robert Gordon. In 1842 he leased it to Sir George Sitwell of Renishaw, Chesterfield. Dr Hooker, the botanist, and Sir David Brewster visited the Sitwells there, and during their stay made an expedition to the Cairngorms.

They saw their figures reflected in gigantic proportions on the mountain mist, a phenomenon which Sir David declared was the true origin of the 'Boda Glas' or Grey Man spoken of by Sir Walter Scott in *Waverley*.

That may, or may not be, but it seems unlikely that the Bodach Glas, or Grey Spectre, which appeared before one of the Highland chiefs on the retreat from Derby in 1745 as a melancholy prediction of his own death was in any way connected with the Fear Liath (Glas) Mór of Ben MacDhui.

Henry Tegner contributed an article to *Scotland's Magazine* in March 1963. In it he briefly discusses the Grey Man, and expresses the view that when eminent men of science like Professor Collie and Dr Kellas bear witness to experiencing fear on Ben MacDhui it is difficult to doubt that something out of the ordinary does, in fact, appear on occasions in certain less frequented Highland locations.

Although he had frequently walked through the Lairig Ghru, at all times of the year and in all sorts of weather conditions, he had never experienced anything of an abnormal nature. He was, however, convinced of the Grey Man's existence for he had seen something remarkably like his double in another part of the Grampian range.

It happened long before the 1939–45 war when he was stalking in the Forest of Drumochter. Locally the phenomenon was known as the 'Spectre of the Boar', the Boar, or Boar of Badenoch, being the conical hill which towers above the Drumochter Pass on the A9 Perth–Inverness road.

One day in the month of October he was out with Kennedy the stalker. They found no deer in Glen Tuirc, nor a sight of any on the slopes of Marcaonach. They spied the Boar and sighted a small herd of hinds with an old stag lying well above them. The ground was fairly easy, and weather conditions favourable with a steady wind from the south-west. When they started there was little sunshine and a good deal of low cloud. Occasionally wisps of mist trailed over the summits of the Boar, and the Sow of Atholl further south. The stalk was not likely to present any difficulties.

They crossed the Tuirc burn, leaving the ghillie in a concealed spot near the base of the Boar, and by working their way up one of the little burns they were able to get well above their quarry. Meanwhile the wind appeared to be strengthening as they stalked to within a quarter of a mile of the stag. The clouds began to break up and momentarily glimpses of blue sky were revealed through rents in the mist. Trailing wisps swept across the face of the Boar.

They rested briefly, and just as they stirred to resume the stalk Tegner's eye caught a movement towards the summit of the Boar. He scanned the ground with his telescope but he could see nothing. Then the sun broke through a gap in the clouds and he saw the 'thing' moving quite distinctly just below the skyline above them.

Tapping Kennedy on the shoulder he whispered to him to look above, but again there was nothing to be seen. The deer remained grazing peacefully. Yet Tegner was positive that his imagination had not played him false, and as they moved on he had the growing conviction that they were being followed. Suddenly he knew that his eye had not been deceived:

The figures were huge as they appeared to travel at great speed across a long streak of mist which enveloped the skyline of the Boar of Badenoch. This time I was certain, I was not dreaming.

‘There’s someone above us, Kennedy,’ I said.

Kennedy stopped to look towards the figures. He saw them, and his jaw dropped whilst his eyes stared. The figures were standing now as if they were looking down at us. They appeared like two giants gazing down on two dwarfs. They did not seem to be much more than a hundred yards from where we stood. It was an extraordinary experience seeing those great figures out there on the hillside. It was certainly uncanny and I felt myself shiver although the day was not unduly cold.

Kennedy was obviously upset by what he had seen. As we stared up into the mist-laden face of the hill the figures quickly disappeared as if they had climbed out of our sight.

‘It’s the Spectre we’ve been seeing,’ said Kennedy. He shook his head in that meaning way which somehow portends disaster. We waited for a few minutes to recover our composure. I was the first to use my glasses to look for the deer we were after. They were nowhere to be seen. Whether the Spectre had put them away, or whether it was our own carelessness I shall never know.

The ghillie told them later that he had seen nothing except the deer suddenly moving off at speed towards the ridge of Marcaonach. Tegner had this to say in conclusion:

In retrospect I believe what we saw that day on the Boar of Badenoch was a trick of sun and cloud such as happens when one is in an aircraft when the shadow of the plane is cast on a cloud band. The machine in strong silhouette appears to be travelling fast across a backdrop of clouds. The sun could well have cast our shadows – Kennedy’s and mine – on to the wreaths of mist above us on the slopes of the Boar of Badenoch.

If such is a proper interpretation of the Spectre then this may well explain the Grey Man of Ben MacDhui, and other Grampian ‘Ghosts’ as well. But then, of course, I may well be wrong. I hope so, anyway, as such things as the Grey Man, the Spectre, and the Monster of Loch Ness make pleasant additions to the romantic Highland scene.

In the January 1966 issue of the *Scottish Field* Tom Weir has an interesting description and classification:

Note the shadow in the centre of the ‘Glory’. It is mine, on the point of a crag, projected by the sun on a scree of grey mist. In thirty years of climbing this is the finest example of a ‘Glory’ I have seen on a mountain.

The effect occurred on the north face of Buachaille Etive Mór last October, at 1.00 p.m. when I climbed out of thick cloud, from gloom to blue sky. It was in that moment I saw the effect shown in the photograph, as a rose of light bloomed in the mist, like a cathedral window of stained glass, with an abstract pattern of shadow which moved when I moved. And just as the stained glass windows of a church brighten with the sunshine outside, so I saw that my ‘Glory’ dimmed as tendrils of vapour danced behind me, temporarily blotting out the sun.

For years Tom Weir called any mysterious shadows round it a ‘Brocken Spectre’, while other observers described them variously as ‘fog-bows’, ‘prismatic halos’, or ‘mirages’, but several effects are possible, and he examines them in some detail so as to arrive at exact terms of reference.

First the Brocken Spectre; in conditions of low mist with the sun behind the observer the projector lamp of the sun, 92 700 000 miles away, throws his elongated shadow against the rising mist, creating the impression of a ghostly giant walking in space.

It may appear to be at a considerable distance from the observer but Weir has proved by photography that it is, in fact, quite close. Equally a small pinnacle is magnified out of all proportion when seen through mist: a ptarmigan, hurtling past, may approach the proportions of an albatross. The magnification is really an optical illusion due to the eyes having no exact point of focus.

A true 'fog-bow' differs from a 'Glory' in this respect that in the 'Glory' the rings spread outwards from the shadow in the centre, and this is clearly seen in Weir's picture. A 'fog-bow' consists of a single arc, so wide that it dwarfs the figure. The red end of the spectrum may be inside the rim, unlike the 'Glory' which is normally on the outside. Also, 'fog-bows' may span 55° whereas 'Glories' do not exceed 12° .

Weir quotes R. T. Ormond, who was for some time superintendent of the Ben Nevis Observatory. He described two against-the-light atmospheric effects, namely, the 'Halo' where the large circle may have a radius of 90° , including tangential arcs, or mock suns; the other is the 'Coronae', small circles not exceeding 10° radius with multi-spectrum colours which may number as many as four sets.

Weir concludes his article on a whimsical note:

I have seen a 'Halo' once, on an Atlantic island in Ireland, where appropriately it had a green cast and a shaft of shadow with a mock sun on the end of it. The only 'Coronae' I have seen have been in Glasgow, near street lamps in moist fog. Neither of these can be said to be exclusively mountain phenomena like the 'Glory', 'Fog-bow', or 'Brocken Spectre'.

Yet I once saw a 'Brocken Spectre' in a field in Kent one October morning when I was giving a hand to thresh some corn. My job was to fork sheaves into the machine from a high stack. It was in 1940 and I was a serving soldier at the time helping with the harvest.

From the south of England I was transported to the mountain tops, for as I worked, sideways to the rising sun, I saw my shadow stand in space to keep me company, supported on a mist of chaff blown out by the thresher. In delight I waved my fork, and at the same moment the spectre became a 'Glory', its colours shimmering as if I had been on the crest of a ridge instead of in the trough of a war. It made my day, but any kind of 'Spectre' has a way of doing that, whatever name you may care to call them afterwards.

One night some years ago when camping with Martin Robertson, Kingussie, my son-in-law, beside the Garbh Uisge Beag, high above Loch A'an, I awoke in the middle of the night and lighting a candle stepped outside into a thick wall of mist. To my astonishment the flame of the candle behind me acted in the same manner as a low sun and I beheld my grotesque shadow shaking a fist at me.

The Bodhisattva

The belief is resolutely held among some followers of the Buddhist, or allied, religion in this country that Ben MacDhui is the haunt of a particularly 'holy' or 'perfect' being of the Buddhist faith, and that levitated Tibetan lamas regularly meet in a cave on Ben MacDhui to discuss the destinies of the world.

The Revd Countess of Mayo, mystic and leader of the Active Truth Academy, Edinburgh, with whom I had some correspondence in connection with the subject of the Grey Man, *vis-à-vis* the levitated Tibetan lamas who were to have held a publicised rendezvous with her on Ben MacDhui in 1960, gives credence to such a belief, and enjoined me:

. . . call your book *The Golden Big White Men of Ben MacDhui*, and lift yourself and your readers out of the negative vibrations of fear and terror.

In the course of correspondence in the *Weekly Scotsman* in 1949 on the subject of the Grey Man, Captain Sir Hugh Rankin, Bart., then of Park House, Blairgowrie, described an actual encounter in the Lairig Ghru pass the previous year.

Sir Hugh is a practising Mahayana Buddhist, and was the second British person to perform the Holy Buddhist Pilgrimage in 1944. He was vice-president of the World Buddhist Association in 1945. In 1959, at his farm in North Wales, he repeated the story of his encounter at greater length to Ian Fraser of the *Press and Journal*.

He declared emphatically that he was not talking 'bunkum' in claiming that both he and Lady Rankin had not only seen the 'Presence' but had actually talked with him in the pass. They instantly recognised him as a 'Bodhisattva', one of the five 'Perfected Men' who control the destinies of this world, and meet once a year in a cave in the Himalayas. They have lived through billions of years of life, and so are disposed to be friendly to ordinary mortals. Sir Hugh resented the popular description of these men as Abominable Snowmen:

'Snowmen, yes', he asserted, 'but benevolent Snowmen.'

Sir Hugh believed that this particular ‘Bodhisattva’ lives permanently in the Cairngorms, probably on the plateau of Ben MacDhui.

The circumstances of their meeting was during a cycling tour of the Highlands, when he and Lady Rankin were on their way from Rothiemurchus to Mar by way of the Lairig Ghru pass. It was the month of July, but, as so often happens, it was bitterly cold in the pass. It is a rough journey at any time, but with bicycles almost a feat of endurance. They had to carry their machines frequently, and particularly over the boulder fields at the Pools o’ Dee. They had just reached the Pools and stopped to rest when they felt the ‘Presence’ behind them:

My wife felt it as distinctly as I did. We turned round and there was the Presence. We were not the least afraid. Being Buddhists we at once knew who it was. We both knelt and made an obeisance.

He was between 6 feet 3 inches and 6 feet 4 inches. He was enormously broad – about 50 inches round the chest I should say. He had big limbs and big hands. He had also very big feet but they made no imprints as, it being July, there was no snow in the Lairig Ghru itself, although there was in the corries. His head was finely chiselled. His nose was neither aquiline nor Roman but was cast in the Indo-Aryan mould. He was olive in complexion. He had long flowing locks of medium dark hair. He was dressed in a long robe like people wear in the East, and had on sandals.

Bodhisattvas appear to be immune to temperature ranges. They feel neither heat nor cold, according to Sir Hugh; and with regard to transportation, food and clothing, the power of levitation enables them to go anywhere at will. They can also conjure food and clothing out of the air. The Countess of Mayo with whom I also had an exchange of correspondence on this theme, is also a firm believer in the power of levitation, and has, she told me, actually practised it. Sir Hugh continued:

The Presence then addressed us – in Sanskrit I think. I could not understand what he was saying, but I replied in Urdu, the only Eastern language I know. I said: ‘I bow to the Lord Bodhisattva who rules the destinies of the world.’

At this point in his narrative Lady Rankin interposed:

As the Presence spoke most beneficent and peaceful rays of light seemed to exude from him.

Sir Hugh gravely confirmed and continued:

I am a Lotus sect Buddhist and my wife is a Zen Buddhist, which is essentially inward and introspective in its effects. She is also very psychic.

The Bodhisattva stayed with us for about ten minutes. Though the path was very rough we were then able to push our bikes. While we were doing so we felt the Presence was leaving us. We looked back but he had vanished completely.

All the time the Bodhisattva was with us a heavenly host of musicians was playing high up in the sky. We could hear the music of bagpipes rising faintly above the squeaky reedy notes of Indian and other Eastern instruments.

Immediately the Bodhisattva left us the music ceased and we never heard it again.

The following amusing poem was prompted from Mrs Lilian Duncan Robb, Aberdeen, with whom I have had a happy correspondence on the subject of the Grey Man, following upon the publication of Sir Hugh Rankin's experience with the Bodhisattva as related to Ian Fraser of the *Press and Journal*:

*If ever ye gang through the Lairig Ghru –
(Abominable Snowman's there the noo!)
Dinna produce a Hielan cromach –
Or try to poke him in the stomach.
For he is 'fifty' round the chest,
And wears a lang robe for a vest.
So if ye hike through Lairig Ghru,
(Grasping claymore and skean dubh,)
Gie him a greeting, like Sir Hugh,
But try the Gaelic, nae Urdu.*

Ghostly Music and Voices

Strange sounds of music and singing are frequently heard in mountain country. To those who have an intimacy with the high tops and corries they are recognised for what, generally speaking, they are. The pleasure derived from them is exquisite. To others they cause dismay and sometimes fear. Curiously, some never hear them at all.

A propos the correspondence in the press on the subject of the Grey Man, 'OLP', in a letter to the *Press and Journal* in January 1926, described an experience of ghostly music as he sat by the burn that splashes down to Loch A'an from the Loch Etchachan direction.

It was about noon, and he was alone as was his custom when bent on writing. The day was peaceful and bright. Before putting pencil to paper a sound, which he appeared to have heard subconsciously all the time, broke into his conscious mind in the form of music rising and falling, distinct one moment, almost inaudible the next.

Startled, and curiously uneasy, he listened intently. There was a long pause and then, as if a door had opened suddenly to release the sound, a fine baritone of astonishing volume echoed among the shattered rocks around him.

He had once sat within ten feet of Edouard de Reszke when he sang *The Two Grenadiers*. It reminded him vividly of that moment, but as he listened to the rising and falling cadence the name of what the unseen voice sang eluded him.

Springing up in some dismay he hunted high and low for the singer, but discovered precisely nothing. Then he recognised the song. It was William Horsley's setting of *If Doughty Deeds*:

*If sweetest sounds can win thine ear
Those sounds I'll strive to catch;
Thy voice I'll steal to woo thyself,
The voice that none can match.*

Surely the most delicately beautiful compliment ever addressed to woman. He fancied that he heard the very words, but they were probably supplied by memory as he listened:

That settled the question of work. I was away for the Shelter Stone, keeping a sharp lookout as I ran. But alas; there was nobody there, nor sign of recent occupation; no solution of the mystery; and a very disappointed man trudged back to the Derry and took a scone and a cup of tea ere he mounted his bike for home.

Several times since I have heard the voice, each time within a mile or two of the place where I first heard it; but not of recent years, for old age has stolen upon me and now denies me the strength for such journeys . . .

It is, perhaps, excusable while on this theme to move momentarily from the Cairngorms to East Anglia and recall that J. Wentworth Day came across two instances of 'singing ghosts' there in 1941.

The first was at Spinney Abbey where Robert Fuller described how at breakfast time on Low Sunday he heard ghostly singing out in the stackyard. It was as clear as a bell a dozen feet above the ground, and at first he thought it was the radio. But this was definitely not the source of the pure, sweet singing, all in Latin, emanating from the site of the old Chapel of the Abbey.

A week later at The Canons in Thetford, Mr Day's host, Dr Jameson, pointed out from a window the gaunt, grey ruins of the great Chapel of the Priory of the Holy Sepulchre, and told him that one Sunday morning in May 1937, the family heard distinct singing in Latin from the roofless Chapel. A whole choir sang for half-an-hour, then the sound of footsteps was heard walking slowly up the stone aisle, and a voice clearly reading prayers in Latin.

Hugh D. Welsh had a life-long interest in climbing, and particularly in the Cairngorms. He was a member of the Cairngorm Club for over sixty years, and President from 1939 to 1946. For a number of years, before he died in January 1969, aged eighty-three, he was Honorary President.

I had a long and absorbing correspondence with him, and some extremely interesting discussions, not only on the subject of the Grey Man, in which he had a deep interest for many years, but also on the broader canvas of our mutual experiences on the high tops. Each summer for many years he and his brother used to spend a fortnight camping on the high plateaux. They had no visual experience of the Grey Man, but they used to listen to 'ghostly music' both by day and by night. In January 1926 he wrote an article to the *Press and Journal* in which he discussed this phenomenon as they had experienced it. It was of singularly beautiful sweetness of timbre as it recurred from a whisper, rising in crescendo till full and rounded, then to a final dying cadence in diminuendo – outburst of melody as if a door were opening and shutting upon a room. Treble and bass voices were distinguishable, never with a definite theme, or melody, but accompanied and enriched throughout by instrumental music. Again no melodic line could be identified.

In daylight or dark, calm or storm, these melodies remained with them, but they were never dismayed. In the often perfect stillness of the mountains it had a wonderfully soothing effect. Talking and laughing by both sexes were also heard close at hand, but words were never distinguishable.

One day after they had explored the smooth water-worn rocks over which the Garbh Uisge Mór tumbles towards Loch A'an, and the chimneys and ledges of the cliffs above, they crept under the shelter of an overhang out of the stiff breeze which was blowing. All the time they had been conscious of musical sounds and cries – sustained notes, some high-pitched, some low-pitched – as of voices in song, becoming clearly audible, and blending inextricably in unison with an orchestral background of strident bass and woodwind, and overtones of vibrant and soaring strings.

Immediately they set about the task of trying to solve the mystery, and lay the ghosts. The solution they arrived at was simple, and completely satisfied them at the time, although Welsh was later to retract and confess that their conclusions, however correct in substance, were too facile, and certainly not a complete answer to the problem.

By careful searching they discovered that the sounds were caused by wind whistling through cracks and funnels in the rocks, the clefts taking the part of organ pipes, each producing a separate note, and the rise and fall in volume originating in the wind currents and eddies. Combined with the sound of falling water the whole had the effect of the most pleasing harmonies.

In such surroundings [he wrote], and under the varied conditions experienced the fairy folk and supernatural could well be imagined as being the cause of it all. The whole district is peopled with benign and malignant beings whose exploits are told of in legend and folklore. It is little wonder there are *sithean* or fairy knolls, near which few would pass in the dark, and from which issued strains of music. To those of us interested in such things anything might be possible. But everything has an explanation, and sometimes the explanation topples over our fanciful creations.

Thirty-six years afterwards when I questioned him closely about this phenomenon of ghostly music and voices, he told me that he had oversimplified the problem in that article, because the same sounds had been heard in dead calm weather in open grassy corries, devoid of rocks or running water. I can vouch for this because I have frequently listened to them with enchantment myself.

Curiously enough, he said, although the sounds were quite audible to himself and his brother, some others, who might at times have been in their company, heard nothing. This also has been my experience.

They occasionally spent some time in both bothies in Glen Eanaich, both now, alas, defunct, while they explored that side of the range. It was, however, only at the upper bothy, near Loch Eanaich, that they ever heard sounds of music, laughing and talking. It was in this same bothy that I, myself, heard for the first time ghostly music and voices, and experienced stark terror. I was a boy of sixteen or so spending my first night alone in the mountains after a day on the high tops, and supremely happy that the whole length of Glen Eanaich was between me and the nearest habitation. I had fared well on brose, bread and cheese, and the meal had been crowned with a pipeful of strong black tobacco in a pipe which had been discarded by my father, and surreptitiously retrieved! As the gloom of the summer's night descended upon the glen, I went outside and had a last look at the darkening cliffs and chimneys of Sgoran Dubh opposite, black and

coldly immutable as marble against the flare in the western sky. Then I closed the door and lay down to sleep on my heather bed. I was dozing off when I heard the sound of approaching voices. Inwardly fuming at this unwelcome invasion of my fine privacy and solitude, I lay for a little in expectation of the visitors' entry, but no footsteps sounded at the door. Curious, I arose and went outside, but not a soul was in sight, and no voice broke the stillness. I decided that my imagination had been playing me tricks and went inside. But I had no sooner burrowed into the heather than I heard a cry, and loud voices near at hand. I thought: 'Johnny McKenzie (the Glen Eanaich stalker and a good friend) is late on the hill: he knows that I am here and he is trying to scare the wits out of me.' Out I went again, and in the gloom searched up and down the glen track, behind the bothy, and up the Coire Dhondail path searching every boulder and hollow. Nothing in the glen stirred but a small breeze, and the sibilant whispering of water over stones. 'There must be *buidseachd* (witchcraft) in this place,' I thought, and with fear freezing the marrow in my bones I hurried inside and barred the door. Hardly daring to breathe, I lay down and listened with thumping heart.

Now it came again, a rustling outside the window and whispering voices, then a lull, and now a burst of wild laughter, singing and chanting, the sonorous sound of organ music. Again a momentary lull and another ripple of laughter, the ineffable sweet music of the flute, and now the drone of the pipes. I knew indescribable fear, and like a hunted wild thing pressed still deeper into the heather as if to force my body through the floor into the earth. How long I lay thus frozen with terror I do not know, but I remember raising myself and sitting up tense, listening with staring eyes. And then I became curiously calm, fear drained from me and I was filled with a strange feeling of euphoria. I knew in that moment that what I heard and experienced was simply the diapason of wind in the cliffs, the remurmur of water over stones, the sussuration of the breeze in the heather, and my own heightened imagination. But perhaps I was too prosaic. Ever since I have lain down in lonely places and waited for the lullaby that seldom failed to bring sleep.

In a letter to *The Scotsman* on 2 September 1963, Seton Gordon recalled an experience in 1926 when along with a friend he crossed Ben MacDhui on the way from Strathspey to Mar.

They were on their way to Braemar to judge the piping at the Braemar Gathering the following day. It was a fine day as they walked through the Forest of Rothiemurchus, and climbed to the summit of the Lairig Ghru pass. When they reached the Pools o' Dee they decided to climb over Ben MacDhui, rather than continue through the pass and round the shoulder of Carn a' Mhaim to Derry Lodge:

We had crossed the high plateau and begun the gradual descent towards Sròn Riach and Glen Luibeg when my friend (whose first visit it was to the Cairngorms) called out to me, 'Who is that playing the pipes?' I replied that the nearest house was many miles distant and that no piper was living there.³ My friend, for the next quarter of an hour, insisted that he was hearing pipe music distinctly; then it faded out gradually. I remember the strange 'fey'

atmosphere over the wild, stony slopes of Ben MacDhui that September day, so the hearing of a ghostly piper did not seem to me to be unusual for my thoughts were centred on an experience of my own.

As an officer in the Grenadier Guards during the First World War my friend had more than once had the experience of second sight – a gift which he said he would have gladly been without.

It is true that the high Cairngorms and the Lairig Ghru have, under certain conditions, an atmosphere scarcely of this world.

I recall that when my companion of many memorable days on the high tops, the late Edwin Davidson, and I were camping for a fortnight on the four highest tops of the Cairngorms, we had a weird experience on our return one day from the cliffs of Coire an Lochain to our base, at the time, on the summit of Cairngorm itself. It was a bright, clear day in high summer with a strong breeze blowing, and as we sauntered round the lip of Coire an t-Sneachda the day's climbing was being discussed. Suddenly there was a thunderous rumble, and an unearthly shriek echoed in the corrie; we were hurtled back from the edge of the cliffs dropping 1000 feet from below our feet, and lashed in the face with scree. White and shaken, we looked at each other in dumb apprehension for a moment or two before realising that the origin of our fright had been a whirlwind shrieking up a chimney in the cliffs. 'Ghostly', perhaps, but no 'music' this, and if we had been a little distance across the plateau from the lip of the corrie, and heard the shriek without feeling the force of the upcurrent, the temptation to attribute to it a supernatural origin might, perhaps, have been irresistible!

Phenomena of this nature, however, which do not appear to be capable of explanation by natural causes, are by no means confined to the Cairngorms. Parallelism is frequently encountered elsewhere, and two instances may be quoted.

In *Harpoon at a Venture*, Gavin Maxwell tells a brief but shuddersome tale of Rhum, where a man he knew had a terrifying experience in a high corrie of Askival. It was dusk and he was alone with a stag he had shot. Suddenly his coat was clutched and he found himself being dragged uphill while a voice screamed from below his feet.

Tony Archer-Lock of Mannamead, Plymouth, wrote to me after reading the Big Grey Man's 'biography' and related his experiences while camping aloft in the Cairngorms. One afternoon while camping in Coire Dhondail above Loch Eanich with his wife they both heard a sharp, loud, ringing noise like a stonemason at work, coming from the top of the corrie. His diary reads:

. . . but although we have the whole area in view there is no one about – just ptarmigan and wheatears, and it certainly is not them. At 2.15 a.m. (dark and cloudy) we again hear these strange sounds. They do sound human-made.

At the above camp, during the same night, at about 2.00 a.m. we both hear a distant bell ring twice, like a clock or buoy. No clock for many miles. While camping on 3 June 1966, on the Braeriach ridge just to the west of the Wells of Dee, in stormy weather, near the rim of the above corrie, I hear two 'bells' on the tumult. Looking at my watch I find that it is 2.00 a.m. I was wracked with cramp at the time, with no thought of bells or clocks, the incident having long since been forgotten. I record a note at once, and listen for more – none all night.

1 June 1971. Camping on the western slopes of Braeriach after an evening of severe thunder. Glorious still sunny morning about 9.00 a.m. My friend and I await the arrival of a colleague. A dotterel is calling regularly from the skyline, so I place a taperecorder up the slope about 150 yards from us, and return to sit with my friend. About

twenty minutes into the tape two men are heard approaching in animated conversation. They pass by and fade. We had a total view of the area for many hundreds of yards (you will know how open it is), and no one could have passed that way without us seeing. We did not go near the recorder as any noise would have spoilt the recording. Strangely, there is no sound of feet crunching the gravel. Unfortunately, it is not (only just) possible to decipher what is being said, but the tones are very friendly.

I June 1972. MacDhui plateaux not far from Lochan Buidhe on the boulder ridge. I walk across the snowfield to place a recorder on a rock which is surrounded by snow. I collect the recorder after an hour or more; no sign of any footprints other than mine. On listening to the tape later, about half way through there is a loud coughing very close indeed to the microphone. We would have been a mile or so away at the time. Only possible plausible explanation is that some scree or snow moved, although it does not sound like that. I suppose it is just possible that someone else walked up to the recorder, and that I missed any footprints, as I would not have been looking specifically – but in the mountains one notices such things with keen interest as you will know. Also, approaching steps would have been clearly recorded through the snow, as my departing ones were.

Writing of his travels in Tibet, André Migot, a French Buddhist doctor, mentions a weird experience near the plateau of Tahoba as dawn was breaking. He had halted for a little at the mouth of a gorge to savour the peace and silence, when suddenly strange sounds of groans, shrieks and wails issued from apparently the depths of the gorge. They were, he was certain, not made by wind, animals or least of all human beings. It was impossible to attribute them to any natural cause, and his blood froze. His tethered pony, which had been quietly grazing, was terrified, and would have bolted if he had not been under restraint. Suddenly all was quiet, and the pony resumed his grazing. The mystery remained with Migot for a very long time:

It is still with me today [he wrote], part of a whole gamut of queer experiences undergone in a land where things happen that happen nowhere else on earth.

Migot, it seems, had not travelled in the Cairngorms!

Footsteps

The experience which Professor Collie and Wendy Wood, among others, had of the sound of footsteps was in snow conditions. But similar experiences in high summer have also been recorded. In the course of our correspondence and discussions the late Hugh Welsh discussed this phenomenon, and in one letter he told me that his first experience was in the summer of 1904, when he and his brother spent a fortnight for the first time on high ground, camping as near the summit cairns as possible. In addition to exploring and becoming thoroughly familiar with the terrain, they collected alpine plants for the Professor of Botany at Aberdeen University, and spiders for Sir J. Arthur Thomson, the Professor of Zoology.

During those sojourns they had the Cairngorms more or less to themselves, for in those days comparatively few ventured near the high tops.

During our first nights at the summit of MacDhui, in our waking spells, we heard the sound of slurring footsteps as if somebody was walking slowly through water-saturated gravel. Thinking it might be a benighted climber we called but got no response, and a look out revealed nothing but darkness. The pacing went on for a short time and we put it down to the movement of deer, although we thought it unlikely that they would be shifting ground during the darkness. During our stay on the plateau we frequently heard this pacing and thought nothing about it, until something struck us as strange. This was that we heard the pacing in daylight quite distinctly, but nothing was to be seen. It was certainly not an echo from anything, and we tried to trace the source but without success. Frequently we were conscious of 'something' near us, an eerie sensation of apprehension, but not of fear such as others appear to have experienced.

On their return to Derry Lodge they told John Mackintosh, the stalker at Luibeg, of their experience, and asked him if the sounds during the night could have been made by deer. He laughed at the idea of deer shifting ground during darkness, and said:

'That would have been the Fear Liath Mór you heard.'

This was the first time they had ever heard of the Grey Man, but neither Mackintosh nor Donald Fraser, the stalker at Derry Lodge, could give them any information about the phenomenon despite the fact that they had lived and worked in the vicinity of Ben MacDhui for about thirty years.

In subsequent years they frequently heard this slow pacing in daylight and dark, but nothing was ever seen. They did, however, live in hopes of glimpsing something, and

perhaps getting a photograph!

The late R. Macdonald Robertson, the author of *Selected Highland Folk Tales*, gave me a personal account of footsteps which also appears in his second volume of the Folk Tales.

For a period of some years he rented, each summer, the farm house of East Croftmore, Boat of Garten. The present tenant's father, Murdy McGillivray, popularly known as 'Murdy Captain', was then alive.

In the summer of 1940, Macdonald Robertson and Murdy motored to Loch Morlich, climbed over Cairngorm, and descended to Loch A'an where they spent some hours fishing. As it was late when they came off the loch they decided to spend the night under the Shelter Stone. Apart from Macdonald Robertson's bull-terrier, they had no other company that night until they were aroused from slumber about midnight by the dog's continuous growling:

. . . finally, we both clearly heard the footsteps of a heavy man coming closer and closer – crunch, crunch on the gravel path outside by which time my dog was barking loudly, but as the footsteps faded away in the dead of night, the dog calmed down and we were soon asleep again. Now, as it was war time there would be less chance of any hiker parading about that lonely and desolate spot especially at that hour of darkness. McGillivray attributed the phenomenon to the Big Grey Man. He said his footsteps were heard before, on occasions, by folk who had camped out, just as we had done. I myself can attach no explanation.

The sound of footsteps in the mountains is not, of course, confined to Ben MacDhui or its environs. The phenomenon has been experienced elsewhere.

In a letter to *The Scotsman* in October 1941, the late M. B. Nettleton described an experience in the Cuillins.

It happened one calm, sunny morning in April 1937, when he was awed by a phenomenon which still remained with him to baffle his most sceptical curiosity. Early in the month when the Cuillin summits were still snow-covered he and a companion had sailed into Loch Scavaig in a small motor boat, and anchored there for a week's climbing around Loch Coruisk.

At 1500 feet up on the long rocky ridge east of Sgur Dubh Beag they rested for lunch. It was a perfect day, windless and sunny. Suddenly they heard the persistent crunch and scrape of nailed boots approaching from below. Surprised, they looked at each other with the same thought flashing through their minds. How could anyone else have arrived in that remote spot by that hour unless they too had landed from the sea? But no other craft was discernible.

At the same time a feeling of great uneasiness overcame us, although nothing had been (or normally is) further from our minds than the occult, and to break the spell we confidently advanced to the edge of our broad ledge to meet the unexpected stranger from below. The sounds had just ceased, and not only was no stranger visible, but it was fairly clear that the ground in the direction of the sounds was steep to an almost incredible degree. There was nothing to block our line of vision, and in the utter stillness the sense of a hostile influence now grew so overpowering that, despite the fine weather, we abandoned our climb, and descended in most indecent haste by the easiest ledges we could find down to Garbh Choire. Nor did we check our pace until we had reached the sunlit waters of Coruisk,

whence we scanned our mountain in vain for sign of any living creature, while we both frankly admitted that if we had been alone our indecent haste would have been panic-stricken flight. On the other hand, the fact that there were two of us precluded the possibility of individual hallucination.

In contrast to this, another friend and I found ourselves for my sins of miscalculation struggling all one April night to extricate ourselves in deep snow from the Lairig Ghru after a long traverse over Cairn Toul and Braeriach. But although we were battling for existence in weather conditions which we knew were congenial to him, no Ferla Mór emerged to molest us that night, and nothing more disquieting occurred than the croak of a ptarmigan above us, which appeared to be a vulture awaiting the collapse of its prey.

The Revd A. S. Mitchell, Fraserburgh, sent me a personal experience. He had in his lifetime climbed Ben MacDhui about nine times in summer and winter, but he had never seen anything of a particularly unusual nature. In the summer of 1963, however, he was reminded of the various stories concerning the Fear Liath Mór as he sat with his two sons on the summit of Sail Liath, the south-east peak of An Teallach in Wester Ross. It was 1.00 p.m. on a day of mixed sun and cloud, but Corrag, Sgurr Fiona and Bidean a' Ghlas Thuill were enveloped in thick mist.

As we sat there we distinctly heard the sound as of slow footsteps, as when one walks over wet gravel. We looked round but no one was visible – no sheep, deer or human. We went to the edge of the cliffs above Toll an Lochain but saw no one. The sound of the slow footsteps died away in a minute or two.

In *Always a Little Further*, Alistair Borthwick discusses the Grey Man, and describes the experience of two friends.

The first was alone on Ben MacDhui, and it was during the descent into the Lairig Ghru on his way to Corrour bothy that it happened. The snow cover was a crisp crust through which his feet broke at every step. As he trudged on the sound of following footsteps began to intrude on his consciousness and, like Professor Collie, he became uncomfortably aware that they did not conform to the rhythm of his own footsteps. They occurred only once for every three steps he took.

'I felt a queer, crinkly feeling on the back of my neck,' he told me, 'but I said to myself, "this is silly". There must be a reason for it. So I stopped and the footsteps stopped, and I sat down and tried to reason it out. I could see nothing. There was a moon about somewhere, but the mist was fairly thick. The only thing I could make of it was that when my boots broke through the snow-crust they made some sort of echo. But then every step should have echoed, and not just this regular one-in-three. I was scared stiff. I got up, and walked on, trying hard not to look behind me. I got down all right – the footsteps stopped a thousand feet above the Lairig – and I didn't run. But, man, if anything had as much as said "Boo" behind me, I'd have run down to Corrour like a streak of lightning!'

The second man's experience was roughly similar except that it occurred in summer daylight. There was dense mist on the Ben, and visibility was reduced to only a few feet.

The footsteps crunching in the scree were only a few yards behind him, and might well have been made by another climber, except that they also were not in unison with his own, and, oddly, when the mist suddenly cleared he could not see a living thing on the mountain.

Borthwick asked: 'Did the steps follow yours exactly?'

'No,' he said. 'That was the funny thing. They didn't. They were regular all right; but the queer thing was that they seemed to come once for every two and a half steps I took.'

He thought it queerer still when I told him the other man's story. You see, he was long-legged and six feet tall, and the first was only five feet seven!

Once I was out with a search-party on MacDhui; and on the way down after an unsuccessful day I asked some of the gamekeepers and stalkers who were with us what they thought of it all. They worked on MacDhui, so they should know. Had they seen Ferlas Mór? Did he exist or was it just a silly story?

They looked at me for a few seconds, and then one said: 'We do not talk about that.'

Donald Stewart, Tomnabrack, Pitlochry, was the stalker at Inchrory Lodge, which lies on the east side of the Cairngorms, for some years from 1937. His beat extended to the summit of Ben MacDhui, but he had no personal experience of the Grey Man. He did, however, tell me about a curious incident which occurred immediately after a radio broadcast on the subject in either September or October 1937. As far as he can recollect, several people took part and described their experiences, but the BBC have been unable to trace any record apart from one on 17 February 1956 on the subject of 'Second Sight'. This broadcast included recorded insets by Wendy Wood, Donald Sinclair and Dr Isaac MacIver, but there is apparently no specific mention of the Grey Man in the actual script. Mr John Welsh broadcast in 'Scottish Life and Letters' on the Grey Man, and there was also my own brief recording in 'Today' on 23 August 1963. The BBC have, therefore, concluded that the broadcast in 1937 must have been an item in one of the magazine programmes.

Donald thought that it might be an interesting talk and invited his ghillies to come up to the house to hear it. When it was finished he had just switched off the set with the remark: 'Did you ever hear such nonsense?' when they heard the porch door open, then the inner door, and then heavy footsteps clumping along the stone passage and pausing at the kitchen door. Thinking it was Donald McHardy, a dumb character from Delnadamph, popularly known as the 'Dummy', who periodically paid a visit and simply walked in without knocking, they paid little attention, but when no one entered Donald became curious and opened the door. There was nobody there and, followed by his cairn terrier, he went out through the wide-open doors and searched round the house. The night was calm and not a living thing stirred. The terrier picked up no particular scent, and she was completely undisturbed.

It remains an unsolved mystery to Donald, but he recalls that the ghillies were perturbed and returned that night to their bothy in a body!

In a similar context, although far removed from Ben MacDhui, Richard Curle's spine-chilling story from his *Caravansari and Conversation* is perhaps worth recalling. As he himself says, it seems inexplicable.

One of the strangest things that ever happened to him was when he was a boy in Scotland. It was winter time, and he was sleeping by himself in a rather isolated room in the lonely house where he was born.

At about two in the morning he was suddenly wide awake for no particular reason, and lay in warm comfort staring out of the window at the snow, and at the branch of a tree, some twenty feet from the window, which was swaying backwards and forwards across his sight.

To his astonishment he now heard the sound of steady, unhurried footsteps approaching the back of the house. In the stillness they were perfectly distinct, and rather ominous in their leisurely tread. They came up to the large door which opened out of the back courtyard and, to his amazement, for it was a long standing ritual that this door had to be bolted every evening, the footsteps now sounded on the courtyard paving, and paused by the back door.

It was sufficiently startling that someone had gained access to the courtyard, but this paled to insignificance when, to his incredulous terror, he heard the steps inside the house itself. Calm, unruffled, pat, pat, they sounded on the flagstones of the lower passage, and it was with a kind of fatal foreknowledge that he presently heard them on the back staircase.

Every corner of the house was an open book to him, and he could follow exactly where they were from moment to moment. At last they reached the top of the stairs, turned sharp left, then sharp left again, descended a few steps, approached the door of the room leading to his room, and stopped finally at his own door.

By this time I was sitting up in bed with my eyes glued to the door and with horror in my heart. The handle turned and in the opening stood a creature with the face of a fox, which walked on its hind legs. It was dressed in some sort of way and, would you credit it, wore a top hat, which added to its appearance an indescribably macabre touch. But its face, I repeat, was fox-like and it had a bushy tail. It was, perhaps, bigger than a real fox, but it was vulpine through and through, although I admit that it had no rank odour.

It gazed at me with a fixed rather than a malign expression, but did not speak. I shouted out, 'Go away!' – how well I remember the exact words! – and it turned round and went away. I heard its steps follow, in retreat, the precise route they had followed before, unhurried, and steady as ever, until at last they died out on the road leading to the woods.

Several explanations have been offered. One is that it was a dream within a dream and that I was asleep the whole time; well, all I can do is to reiterate, emphatically, that I was wide awake. This may not sound convincing, but if one does not know when one is wide awake, what does one know? Of course, I may, for the first and last time, have been subject to an hallucination, but, if so, it was a remarkably thorough one. Still another explanation is that it was a hoax; but who on earth, even if in his dwarfish dimensions he were able to disguise himself as a fox, could make his legs *shrink*?

The thing seems inexplicable to me, who have pondered it for over forty years.

Footprints in the Snow

The question of strange footprints in the snow is surrounded by innumerable difficulties which appear to be insurmountable. They have been recorded from time to time in the Cairngorms, but most of the reports have had a fictional flavour, and they have been treated with the utmost reserve.

In an article which appeared in the *Weekly Scotsman* in October 1965, the writer described a ten-foot figure which passed within five yards of where he sat at the mouth of the Shelter Stone, peering into swirling snow and dense mist. Afterwards the footprints and length of stride were measured. The foot was about fourteen inches long, and the stride covered four and a half to five feet.

A letter to the writer, requesting further information on his experience was ignored!

In his *Romantic Speyside* James Alan Rennie describes his own experience of discovering similar tracks about one mile from Cromdale in lower Speyside on 2 December 1952. The photographs of 'footprints' in his book are unambiguous, but it is regrettable that no casts were obtained for scientific examination.

They were running across a stretch of snow-covered moorland, each print 19 inches long, about 14 inches wide, and there must have been all of 7 feet between each 'stride'. There was no difference between a right and left foot, and they proceeded in an approximately single line.

Like the Devon tracks⁴ they were bilobal in shape, and although there were no walls in the vicinity for them to climb, they did leap across a sunken roadway at one point for a distance of thirty feet or so. I followed the tracks for about half a mile until they terminated at the foot of a pine, for all the world as though the strange creature making them had leapt up into the foliage of the tree. Yet they did not end here, for about twenty yards further on, in an adjoining patch of arable, I picked them up again. They traversed the little white field, plunged down the hill to the river's edge, and disappeared opposite the village churchyard.

What a perfect vanishing point for an Abominable Snowman!

The sun was dipping low towards the horizon. Like Dr Collie, I took to my heels and ran – although not for the same reason. I wanted to collect a camera and get a picture of those tracks before the light went.

In this, I am glad to say, I was successful, and as soon as the prints were ready I showed them to several local people, including gamekeepers and ghillies. I noted the light of uneasiness in the eyes of some as they studied the photographs, and the puzzlement in others. One ghillie stated bluntly that they were Bodach-tracks, while the rest could make no guess as to their origin.

I will confess that I should have been equally baffled but for a rather unique experience that came my way about thirty years ago.

He describes the experience he had in 1924 when he was working in Northern Canada with an exploration party. One day, in company with a French-Canadian dog-skinner, he was snow-shoeing over a frozen lake and came upon strange tracks which puzzled him, and reduced his companion to a state of gibbering terror. They were almost oval in shape, as if they had been made by snow shoes of the 'bear paw' type, except that two toe-like impressions projected from the main print, and they ran in an almost straight single line. Apart from their size, they were astonished by the distance between each imprint, for they were greater than the length of a tall man.

If Rennie was perplexed the dog-skinner was almost paralysed with fear. Crossing himself, praying in voluble French, and muttering about the 'Wendigo', he pleaded that they should hurry on to their camp without delay. But Rennie was still curious about those tracks and examined them more closely. They appeared to be uniform in shape and size, and the length of stride did not vary. He was completely puzzled, and confesses that he was to some extent infected by his companion's fear as he gave in to his pleading and pushed on to camp.

Significantly, both the dog-skinner and the French-Canadian cook deserted down-country, and Rennie was to remember his first encounter with the tracks of the mythical 'Wendigo' because of the inconvenience caused by their desertion.

The survey continued, and the incident had almost faded from his mind for the time being when he had occasion to cross the same lake again, but this time alone.

It was a day of brilliant sunshine with the white expanse of the snow-covered lake gleaming brightly in the frosty air. All the world was silent and still, except for the crunching of my racquettes in the crisp snow. A few small scatterings of cloud suggested that a fair breeze might be blowing upstairs, although at ground level nothing of this could be felt. I was within half a mile of the shore when I saw the mysterious tracks for a second time – *on this occasion while they were actually being made!*

There on the flawless, smooth white of the snow, a whole succession of tracks in 'line-astern' were appearing miraculously before my eyes. No sign of life anywhere, no movement even, other than the drifting clouds overhead and those tracks springing suddenly into being as they came inexorably towards me.

I stood stock-still filled with reasonless panic. The tracks were being made within fifty yards of me – 20 – 10 – then smack! I shouted aloud as a large blob of water struck me full in the face. I swung round brushing the water from my eyes, and saw the tracks continuing across the lake.

In that moment I knew that the Wendygo, Abominable Snowman, Bodach Mór, or what have you, was for ever explained so far as I was concerned.

In Rennie's opinion the explanation was simple – a freak current of warm air coming in contact with the low temperature had created condensation which was projected earthwards in the form of water blobs. As they landed in the snow they left tracks resembling those of some fabulous animal.

He had, on occasion, encountered them in the Arctic and other parts of the world and, once, in the severe winter of 1939, in the High Weald of Kent. In his view 'water blobs' can perform every trick accredited to the Abominable Snowman, crossing the roofs of houses, leaping high walls, and crossing ravines; in other words a matter for study by the meteorologist rather than the zoologist or demonologist.

Meteorologists are, however, extremely cautious in committing themselves to any specific explanation. The Meteorological Office reply to my enquiries on the subject was as follows:

I am afraid that we have no satisfactory explanation to offer and, in the absence of a convincing argument, there is nothing to be gained by comment based on conjecture. There are many factors that can contribute to fractures in a snow surface. Daytime heating and night cooling can create a surface composed partly of snow crystals and partly of ice. Some of the daytime heating could result in snow-melt percolating through the snow and running off underneath as the topography directs it. These actions can weaken the surface from underneath. These basic physical and topographical influences do not, of course, completely satisfy anyone.

Less mythical perhaps are the stories of huge, hairy, 8-foot tall and enormously strong creatures in the Pacific North West which walk erect and look more like men than apes. They are known to the Red Indians and Canadians as Sasquatch, and in America as Bigfoot.

Scores of eye-witnesses have given evidence of seeing giant ape-like creatures, and their unique footprints measuring 16 inches and more in length. The stories of sightings are remarkably consistent and similar, and since the reports have been so separated in time and location there appears to be little chance of people working together to perpetrate a hoax.

No complete record of sightings has ever been attempted because as one witness said, 'It's better to keep your mouth shut than have everybody say you're crazy'; but John Green, editor-publisher of *Advance*, the newspaper serving the Agassiz-Harrison Lake area of British Columbia, has collected over 250 reports of sightings, photographs of footprints, faeces and other evidence, covering an area from Alaska to Mexico, from the Pacific coast to northern Michigan. Green was a sceptic to begin with but as evidence mounted he became convinced of the existence of the Sasquatch.

Apart from the subjective evidence, the faeces and hair collected have been subjected to analysis. The faeces, human-like in form, contained vegetable matter and the hair of small rodents, while the hair was of no animal known to science.

The most intriguing evidence, however, is a 16-mm colour film taken in 1967 by Roger Patterson, a Yakima, Washington, rancher who had been interested in the Sasquatch-Bigfoot for a long time. Convinced that photographic evidence was the only incontrovertible proof of the creature's existence, short of capturing one, he spent about ten days on horseback scouting an area at Bluff Creek in northern California. Bob Gimlin, an animal tracker, accompanied him.

Early in the afternoon of 20 October as they rounded a bend in the creek they were following Patterson's horse suddenly stopped and snorted, reared and then fell on its side. In a moment he saw the reason.

A huge, erect creature stood about 125 feet distant across the creek. Its head was human-like but considerably more slanted with a large forehead and wide nostrils. The arms hung almost to the knees, and it was covered with hair two or three inches long,

brown underneath, lighter on the top. The face was bare. It was a female with large, pendulous breasts.

As Patterson grabbed his cine-camera the creature moved off along a sandbar towards the hillside while Patterson in hot pursuit shot pictures as he trotted after it. At one point it turned round and stared curiously at him. Then it disappeared into the woods.

Robert Titmus, a former taxidermist, who lives in Kitimat, British Columbia, examined and made plaster casts of ten of the creature's huge footprints nine days later. He has studied Sasquatch intensively for ten years or so and considers himself an expert at spotting hoaxes. In his report he said that he could conceive of no way by which these tracks might have been faked, for tests indicated that the creature which made them would have to be at least 40 to 50 stones in weight.

Some scientists who examined the rather blurred 29-foot segment showing the creature walking away with a man-like stride immediately questioned the human fluidity of movement, and branded the creature in the film as a hoax, while others refused to commit themselves.

John Napier, director of the Smithsonian Institute's Primate Biology Department, rightly declared that the presence of unknown humanoid creatures in the Pacific North-west is a possibility which should not be discounted, for scientific literature abounds in the tarnished reputations of men who dismissed initial reports of the existence of the giant squid, the gorilla, okapi, and giant panda.

Donald Abbot, an anthropologist in the Provincial Museum in Victoria, British Columbia, was initially one of the sceptics. He later changed his view that if the evidence before him is the work of hoaxers it must be one of the most elaborate hoaxes ever known, and almost as incredible as the existence of the creature itself.

Is the possibility of such an unclassified creature living in a rugged 150 000-square-mile area, much of which has never really been penetrated, so unacceptable? After all there are 70 000 square miles of national forest in Washington, Oregon, and California. For some sections the only maps available are from aerial surveys. British Columbia is even less developed. Almost 250 000 square miles of its total area have only one main road and a scattering of small villages. This is exactly the kind of wilderness in which animals with only normal cunning might easily remain out of sight of man.

Roger Patterson continued his researches, financed by the North-west Research Association of Yakima, Washington, but in addition to camera he was also armed with dogs and tranquilliser guns in the hope of capturing a live specimen. It was felt that if the animal really existed its capture could well prove to be one of the most important discoveries in history. Unfortunately no further information has been gathered to date. There is evidence, as far back as 1870, of similar creatures which are said to inhabit the remote forests of the Caucasus. The Russians call them *almas*, and, from the evidence collected, Soviet scientists have managed to build up the equivalent of an Identikit picture.

In 1968 Professor Jean-Marie Kaufman, a member of the Soviet Geographical Society, published a report on the creatures in the Soviet Magazine *Science and Religion*.

The Italian explorer Attilio Galli's fascinating book *Sangoma* is largely devoted to his quest in the forests of the Congo for the mysterious and terrifying *Mulahu* which he appears to have actually seen. This creature seems to have some affinities with the East African legends of the Nandi Bear and the Ng'oloko.

The Sasquatch has some affinity to the creature which Richard Frere's friend claimed to have seen during his lone vigil on Ben MacDhui ([here](#)), but it would be taxing credulity to its limits to suggest that a Sasquatch-like creature roams the barren plateaux of the Cairngorms!

In the course of correspondence on mountain spectres in *The Scotsman* in October and November 1941, J. E. R. Oldfield wrote:

The letters on the subject of 'Terror' by Mr W Addis Miller and 'Mountain Spectres' by Mr Frank Smythe and Miss Marsali Ross are most interesting, but surely the whole subject should be dealt with and all similar experiences collected and recorded. It does appear that these experiences are most apt to be met with in the mountains, whether because of the solitude prevailing there or because people in lonely and perhaps eerie surroundings become more percipient. In most cases only footprints or hoofmarks are the evidence.

Mentioned in the press not long ago was the story of Sir James Ross at Kerguelen, in the Antarctic, in 1840, when he was astonished to find in the snow 'the singular footsteps of a pony or ass', which he lost on reaching 'a large space of rocky ground'. Also the story of the 'Devil's Hoofmarks' in the snow on 8 February 1855, the hoofmarks apparently coming out of the sea and ultimately returning to it.⁵

The late Mr Oldfield's reference is to a time when excitement and fear were aroused in the towns of Topsham, Lympstone, Teignmouth, Exmouth and Dawlish in Devon by the discovery of bilobal tracks in the shape of a large cloven hoof. They crossed high walls, roof tops and wide ditches with a complete contempt for obstacles in any shape or form. The press, including *The Times* and *Illustrated London News*, gave prominence to the phenomenon with sketches and eye-witness accounts; theories grew from theories with reckless abandon – a kangaroo, a gigantic bird hitherto unknown to science, a supernatural agency; the clergy thundered that Satan was abroad in pursuit of his own; the district was disturbed by fear and alarm; but no satisfactory explanation appears to have been provided by anyone.

Mr Oldfield's letter continued:

I think, speaking from memory, that the story of the Barrisdale beast dates from about forty years ago; and about that time there was the story of the stalker out after hinds in Knoydart. Sheltering from a snowstorm, the stalker noticed ptarmigan apparently disturbed by something. On going to look he found hoofmarks in the snow which he followed until they vanished at the foot of a precipice.

Then there were the footprints in the snow of the 'abominable snowman' on Mount Everest; and only quite recently, on 28 May, the huge footprints found in the village of Jamadarpara Belakoba, Jalpaigur, Bengal – each footprint 22 inches long and 11 inches wide and 6 inches deep in the soft earth, the measurements indicating a stride of 12 yards! It is perhaps worthy of a remark that these hoofmarks do not show the traditional 'cloven hoof', but rather appear like those of a pony or ass, and Pan was supposed to have the cloven hoof.

Does the Abominable Snowman really exist? Over quite a long period of years a formidable volume of evidence has been accumulated from the reports of observers about him and allied phenomena. But scientists are cautious people, unwilling to concede very much without incontrovertible proof.

The Yeti, or Abominable Snowman, was introduced to the public in the first Mount Everest (Reconnaissance) Expedition in 1921–22. Col. Howard Bury, the leader, encountered footprints resembling those of a human being on the Lhakpa La, a 21 000-foot pass to the north-east of Everest. Tracks for which no adequate explanation has so far been given, including the strange stone footprints in the Rongbuk valley, have been observed frequently in the Himalayas and will, no doubt, continue to be seen. Until a worthier claimant is discovered they will also continue to be attributed to the Abominable Snowman and, as H. W. Tilman of the 1938 and 1948 Expedition has said:

I think he would be a bold and in some ways an impious sceptic who after balancing the evidence does not decide to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Space Visitors and Cosmic Communication

It seems ludicrous even to suggest that Ben MacDhui may be an earth-fall for visitors from outer space, but, however improbable, the claim has been made with the deepest conviction in certain quarters that the Ben is, in fact, the home and laboratory internally of spacemen – The Great White Brotherhood.

The following which these groups have is quite impressive, and it is perhaps relevant to the subject of the Grey Man to examine one of them which has branches in the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Rhodesia and Japan.

The Aetherius Society held its inaugural meeting with a handful of members in 1954, following an initial meeting and public séance in the Caxton Hall, London. Its founder and chairman, George King – now the Revd Dr George King – had been a taxi-driver, but until he was made aware that he was to become the ‘Primary Mental Channel of the Space Intelligences’ he had, apparently, had no mystical experiences. The movement was limited to Britain until, in 1958, Dr King claimed to have come face to face with the Master Jesus on Holdstone Down, a hill in North Devon.

‘A stream of energy,’ he avers, ‘was sent through me out into the world, and also into the very rocks below my feet. “Holdstone Down” had become a Holy Mountain.

Operation Starlight had begun.’

In his booklet, *My Contact With the Great White Brotherhood*, Dr King describes how, with the assistance of carefully chosen mountain teams, he travelled through the British Isles, across the American continent, Australia and New Zealand; back through Switzerland, and finally to finish his gigantic task on a slab of reddish-brown rock overlooking the Chamonix Valley in France:

During these travels I was used as an essential link in the chain between Interplanetary Intelligence and this Earth, so that eighteen Mountains could be Charged throughout the world.

The significance of this Charging Operation is important to all men. The Mountains which have been Charged hold great Cosmic Energies which can be tapped and used by everyone who makes a pilgrimage to these Sacred Places.⁶

One of the mountains so ‘charged’ was Creag an Leth-Choin (3448 feet high) approximately three miles NNW of Ben MacDhui, where, in 1958, a certain Holy Rock

was painted with the Aetherius Society symbol, and where, on 9 September 1961, Dr King claims to have been contacted by a member of the Great White Brotherhood, and enjoyed a unique experience and contact with one of the most important Great White Brotherhood Retreats in the world. This was a huge dome-shaped auditorium in the bowels of Ben MacDhui occupied by many other 'Beings', some of whom were tending advanced radionic recording apparatus of a type undreamed of by ordinary mankind. The purpose of the records being taken was, apparently, to make a complete and exact assessment of the spiritual work of every large or small religious and spiritual organisation on Earth. The vital significance of this enormous task is clear, Dr King explains, when it is realised that the Earth today is on the verge of its 'Cosmic Initiation'. When it comes, he says, the records in the Archives of the Retreat will show the worth of every major and minor active religion on this planet.

Dr King kindly consented to the use of a condensed version of his booklet which I had written, but I have contented myself with a brief *résumé* of some of its contents.

At the Sociological Section of the British Association in 1965, Mr J. A. Jackson, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of East Anglia, read a paper on the Sociology of Religion, in the course of which he discussed the quasi-religious cult of the Aetherius Society.

My late friend, Hamish Corrie, expressed some thoughts on extra-terrestrial 'visitations' and supposed 'communications'. It represents briefly a coldly objective and scientific riposte to the fantasies and bizarre speculations of the science-fiction theorists and enthusiasts who claim that the Ben MacDhui phenomena are attributable to visitors from outer space. Some of his comments are as follows:

Some correspondents – notably the Aetherius Society and the Active Truth Academy of Edinburgh – have averred that Ben MacDhui has become an earth-fall for space beings, and – the phrase is their own – 'a centre of cosmic intelligence'. The corollary being that not only have space visitors succeeded in landing there, they have also communicated with humans. Inevitably these assertions are linked with reports about unidentified flying objects, and, more oddly still, flying monks, levitating Tibetan mystics and gymnosophists.

Disregarding the interplanetary thesis, it is sometimes overlooked that worlds, both macrocosmic and microcosmic, co-exist with man on Earth. Half a century ago, the philosopher Bergson invited his audience to consider the termites. A sightless world, one of Earth's oldest societies, the termites have survived for a 100 million years – from aeons before man built his first mud hut. They are the perfect communists; their queens the state ovipositors. An urgent streaming of instinctive protoplasm. A poser, no more and no less enigmatic than the gulfs beyond thought; the Coal Sack Nebula of the Milky Way. Does the future, on some other worlds, belong to creatures like these; or to the invisible multitudes around us; the monorans, the protozoa, the amoebas? But these worlds are not for man; although assuredly all serve some purpose; often incomprehensible to us.

To generations reared upon science-fiction romances it is understandable, perhaps, that the phenomena of Ben MacDhui should – by some – have been attributed to extra-terrestrial agency. However, by any criteria, these 'theories' seem not only fanciful but untenable.

Arguments for the existence of intelligent beings on the neighbour worlds of our own solar system seem ruled out by such inconclusive evidence as we possess; though, theoretically at least, not perhaps on the hypothetical planets of other remoter star systems.

Shall it ever be possible for us to communicate with these worlds? We can only say, regretfully, that it seems unlikely; at least for a very long time to come. There, for the time being, we must leave it.

But it will be apparent that this is not very favourable ground for the claim that the desolate sub-arctic plateau of Ben MacDhui is, of all places, the seat of intelligence from outer space; from beyond our ken.

Aristotle urged his pupils to study the stars. Let us take his advice and study one star only.

Alpha Centauri is our sun's nearest neighbour; some 26 billion miles away. Whether it has any planets orbiting or not we do not know. The speed of light, and/or, radio waves, 186 000 miles a second, is the highest theoretical speed attainable in the universe. A spacecraft even if capable of attaining this speed would require a round trip of some fifteen years to visit the Centauri system, and return. An impossibly long journey for the travellers – impossible on many counts, which need not be stressed here.

Similarly, alternating current radio communications with inhabitants of the Centauri system, if there were any, would present well nigh insuperable difficulties. Apart from the matter of evolving some common denominator of communication with minds, perhaps utterly alien in kind, the mere time-lag between question and answer would be some fifteen years also. Equally, this disability of 'time-lag' would apply to the Centauri end transmissions, however technically superior the transmitters.

The nature of the 'space/time continuum' is, as yet, a mystery to astronomers and philosophers. But, having regard to this one example of Alpha Centauri, communications with remoter systems, tens, hundreds, and even thousands of light years away – the thousand years of Polaris for example – would seem insoluble.

The Royal Astronomical Society recently announced the discovery of regular radio signals from sources in the Milky Way. Three sources emit signals at about one-and-a-quarter second intervals: the fourth more rapidly, its pulses come every quarter of a second.

Are these signals artificial? Professor Graham Smith of Jodrell Bank, and others, conclude that the pulses emanate from 'White Dwarf' stars; or from even denser stars, the 'neutrons', in which all the material has been fused into sub-atomic particles.

'White Dwarfs', much older than the sun, have dissipated most of their molecular fuel used to produce solar energy. The 'signals', like the ticking of a clock, arise from dense layers of hydrogen, contracting and expanding above the star's surface. When contracting they would produce more energy, 'the ticking' of the clock. It is estimated that these still powerful, pulsating radio sources are distant some two hundred light-years or say, a thousand million million miles. The original 'dwarfs' may even have ceased to exist. 'Beacons' or 'artifacts', most unlikely; but on what system is the dynamo of the Universe wound up? The sun itself is but a morning star.

* * *

When we contemplate our nearest neighbour worlds as abodes of life, the distances involved are nothing like so momentous. All are relatively close in space and time. But, apart from the vital question of whether sufficient sunlight, water, and oxygen are

present, let us consider simply temperature. The range within which the various functions of active life are possible is narrow. Starting a little below the freezing point of water, it ranges up to about 140° Fahrenheit. Thus, the temperature band, the stable environment suitable for life – as we know it – amounts to about 110°. Below this scale, organisms enter into a state of cold rigor. Above, dissolution quickly supervenes. Only the Earth, and possibly parts of Venus, include the entire zone of active life within their temperatures. On Mars, a colder world, temperatures range from about 95° below zero Fahrenheit, to about 85° above. In its upper quarter this coincides with the lower half of the biothermal band (of 110°).

About Venus our knowledge is small and mainly inferential.

The real planet of mystery, the nature of its surface, beneath its dense, opaque, yellowish-white cloud cover, is unknown. The length of its day, its rotation generally assumed to be slower than ours, and the tilt of its polar axis, are mysteries.

Its surface temperature has been calculated (on the basis of some uncertain assumptions) at about 120° Fahrenheit, ranging up to 140° at noon in the tropics. Recent American and Soviet probes obtained data which suggest that these figures may be even higher. They would be less, perhaps, in more temperate latitudes. It is also claimed that they detected minute traces of water vapour in the Hesperian clouds. If correct, this is new. No oxygen seems yet to have been detected.

The chief constituent of the planet's 'air' appears to be carbon-dioxide (carbonic acid gas), in enormous quantities. We do not know how deep this copious, cloudy atmosphere, masking the Hesperian surface, is. The surface has been surmised to be:

- (a) wholly oceanic;
- (b) wholly arid and barren, at near furnace heat, continually scourged and eroded by scorching dust storms;
- (c) a 'Lost World', analogous to that of Earth in the period of the 'Coal Measures' – so vividly portrayed by the Scottish geologist, Hugh Miller, in his remarkable book *The Old Red Sandstone* – sustaining such primitive life forms as molluscs, fish, insects, and a few amphibians.

The fitness of Venus, therefore, as a biological habitation, appears highly doubtful. Dr Heinz Haber, a distinguished German/American scientist, has suggested that a primitive kind of life might exist on Venus, in the form of spores or biological 'aerosols', floating in the planet's atmosphere.

But this is hardly the kind of life we seek, in our scrutiny of our neighbour worlds. Mars, the red planet, remains the great enigma.

Ever since, in 1877, Schiaparelli drew attention to certain strange appearances, more or less linear markings on its surface, which he designated 'canali' (water channels), now declared by some to be optical illusions, controversies and debates have raged interminably. In the light of the latest research by space probes the theory of a network of 'canals' or waterways on Mars seems clearly no longer tenable.

Is there life on Mars? Are there any Martians? Do our telescopes disclose a doomed world? These and kindred questions have been intriguing astronomers, biologists and laymen for a century.

According to one of the most distinguished of living French astronomers and astrophysicists the answer is still in doubt. In his admirable book, *The Planet Mars*, translated by Patrick Moore, Gérard De Vaucouleurs, brilliantly and lucidly, answers outstanding questions about Mars, in so far as they are, at present, answerable. He sums up, indeed, the extent of human knowledge about the green-and-red planet. No more penetrating study has appeared; and it is commended to all students and researchers whose interest may have been stimulated by this briefest of surveys, from a layman's angle. No student of the Martian problem can, as Moore comments, afford to be without this most important of contributions to planetary research.

Most astronomers now agree that the existence of plant life upon Mars is well established. But the odds against intelligent beings existing there are so great as to place the idea of 'visitors from Mars' in the realms of fantasy. The recent detection in space of particles believed to be chlorophyll dust has rekindled speculation about the existence of vegetable life on other planets.

Dr Hubertus Strughold, a leading German/American biologist, who has sharply scrutinised the biological possibilities of Mars, considers that its plant life is intermittent, flourishing by day during certain seasons and becoming latent in the icy cold of the Martian nights. On Earth, he points out, vegetation is intermittent with respect to winter and summer. But on Mars there seems to be no reason why it should not be diurnally as well as annually photorhythmic. In a manner of speaking, plants would noctivate, as certain animals and plants on Earth hibernate in winter. Every evening is perhaps a little autumn on Mars; every morning another spring.

To meet the danger of dessication and freezing by night, Martian plants may have developed thick skins, rinds or hairy covers, which would disguise the presence of chlorophyll and water to the searching spectroscopist.

Dr Strughold further considers that although there may be little or no atmospheric oxygen on Mars, it is still quite possible that there is an invisible layer of oxygen concealed in the intercellular air spaces of the plants. Maintained at the proper humidity and temperature it would constitute a sort of 'underground atmosphere', circling once daily like a tide around the globe in company with the sun.

This biospheric 'air', if it exists, would escape the eye of the astronomer. It would be undetectable by our spectroscopes. It would be, in fact, an inner air that we could only detect by observation made on Mars itself.

Observations of the twilight arcs on Mars tend to confirm that clouds accumulate and thicken towards nightfall, dispersing in the Martian mornings. If the cloud cover stays unbroken during the hours of darkness, the night temperature might be higher than supposed. In this connection, appreciable heat is radiated from the dark side of Venus; suggesting that the planet's rotation could be faster than is thought.

One day space explorers from Earth may land on Mars. What will they find there? Bizarre, unfamiliar plants, reviving and withering with the long seasons; or a lifeless ochre-red desert, the colour of 'dragon's blood', stretching, sere and stricken, to the near horizons, on which optical illusions, mirage-like, produce the aspirations of green oases.

V. A. Firsoff, author of *The Cairngorms on Foot and Ski*, in a brilliant book has subjected the Martian problem to rigorous study and examination. His conclusions are original and stimulating, and can be commended.

Space exploration has begun. Astronauts have landed on the moon, establishing there two-way radio communication with Earth, American and Soviet unmanned probes have orbited Venus and Mars. sending back results, fascinating in themselves, but, as yet, inconclusive. A survey of the outer planets is projected; with, perhaps, a manned flight to Mars.

Yet, when all is said and done, the prospect of encountering intelligent life forms on the inhospitable neighbour worlds of our system is unlikely – even illusory. And this must be but cold comfort for those who hold, however sincerely, that the bleak summits of Ben MacDhui have become an earth-fall for alien beings; from beyond our ken.

Nevertheless, few can doubt that, in the infinite vastness of the cosmos, there are other inhabited worlds.

Beyond the bounds
our staring rounds
Across the pressing dark,
The children wise
of outer skies
Look hitherward
and mark
A light that shifts,
a glare that drifts,
Rekindling thus and
thus –
Not all forlorn, for
Thou hast borne
Strange tales to
them of us.

Theories and Beliefs

Since Professor Collie's sensational disclosure in Aberdeen on 28 November 1925, innumerable theories about the Grey Man phenomenon have been advanced in the press and various publications, and in the following cross-section it will be observed how widely variant they are.

Following upon the *Press and Journal* report of 30 November 1925, a number of climbers were interviewed and their views were expressed in a further report in the same paper on 3 December, reprinted here in full, under the heading 'Mountain Climbers and the "Ghost" of Ben MacDhui. Opinions on the Elusive Big Grey Man':

BEN MACDHUI

(Ferla Mhór)

I saw him once – I saw him twice –
'Tis said you dare not see him thrice!
He wanders on the mountain height,
A ghostly form – a fearsome sight –
The Big Grey Man o' Ben MacDhui!

The Big Grey Man, he stood as high
As yonder cairn against the sky:
I quailed before the spectre grim –
He vanished thro' the twilight dim,
The Big Grey Man o' Ben MacDhui!

The mountain mist had me in thrall –
But now I heard his footsteps fall,
Crunching the snow upon the hill,
I heard him follow – follow still –
The Big Grey Man o' Ben MacDhui!

Uncanny was the crunching sound,
I fled like deer before the hound,
Behind I did not dare to look,
To my four steps, one stride he took,
The Big Grey Man o' Ben MacDhui!

At last I left behind the snow,
And came into the woods I know –
That eerie mount I'll climb no more,
Content to see thro' legend-lore
The Big Grey Man o' Ben MacDhui!

HH

The story of the ghost which is said to haunt Ben MacDhui (4296 feet), the highest mountain of the Cairngorm range, and the second highest in Scotland, told at the Cairngorm Club dinner in Aberdeen on Saturday night by Professor J Norman Collie, lecturer in Organic Chemistry at London University, has occasioned widespread interest. There are some who firmly believe in the possibility of such a spectre – stalking abroad upon the summit with a fearsome 'crunch-crunch' footstep in the snow – and there are many experienced mountaineers who frankly state that such a suggestion is 'all nonsense'.

The tale thrilled the audience which Professor Collie addressed, and recalled the lines from the *Ancient Mariner*:
Like one that, on a lonesome road,
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

Among the climbers interviewed was Robert Clark who had almost forty years' experience of climbing in the Cairngorms. As far as he could find on subsequent investigation the story was quite unknown on Upper Deeside, but it was still current on the Rothiemurchus side. The first time he had encountered the story in print was in Dr Ernest A Baker's *The Highlands With Rope and Rucksack* (1924). In this charming book the author, a well-known mountaineer, describes the eerie feeling that overtook him and a companion on the higher slopes of Ben MacDhui one dreary autumn, and mentions one hard-headed mountaineer who told him that nothing on earth would induce him to be on Ben MacDhui alone, even in broad daylight.

In the course of the interview Clark mentioned the implicit belief in the existence of spirits, mostly malignant, held by natives of mountainous countries, and referred to the difficulties encountered by Whymper on the Matterhorn where, on occasion, he had trouble in getting his guides to proceed in face of their superstitious fears. He conceded that nearer home a belief in the supernatural had by no means died out, and mentioned one well-known writer who had, in the shadow of the Cuillins, the feeling that she was being followed by an unseen presence. But of all the hillmen he had ever met not one ever confessed to meeting anything malignant in his mountain wanderings. And that, apart from the Spectre of the Brocken, had been his own experience despite being alone at the cairn of Ben MacDhui on eight months of the year, and on three of the other four months within sight of it. Moreover, he had crossed the mighty plateau more than a hundred times without any untoward experience. 'One likes to think,' he added, 'that there is really a mountain spirit benign and beautiful, unseen, but ever ready to bless the true worshipper at her shrine, and in this fine faith one may well rest content.'

Sir George Adam Smith, former Principal of Aberdeen University, had never in all his life heard a whisper of any spectre haunting Ben MacDhui, and William Garden, advocate, then President of the Cairngorm Club, regarded the suggestion of a Big Grey Man as 'perfect nonsense'. The Secretary of the Club, John A. Nicol, advocate, was in complete agreement with the President who, later, on 28 March 1941, wrote a letter to *The Scotsman* recapitulating the experiences of both Collie and Kellas:

No doubt, [he wrote], these experiences of Professor Collie and Dr Kellas are extraordinary and call for some explanation, but, as far as I am concerned myself, I have had some strange experiences, especially in the winter time, both on the mountain tops and on countryside roads. On the latter I remember very well on more than one occasion being convinced that I heard footsteps in the snow crunching behind me on a bright moonlight night as I

walked along a country road in Aberdeenshire, and being almost afraid to look round, but on doing so found that it was pure imagination.

J. A. Parker, an engineer and an experienced climber, who had spent a considerable time alone near the summit the previous Easter prospecting for a site for the proposed indicator, gave the story little credence; and Major Butchart, Secretary of the University, who took part in the erection of the indicator, was another who bore testimony on the negative side. He said: 'The general belief is that it is the spirit of the mountain trying to prevent us from climbing it. There have been many accidents, and some believe "the ghost" to be the spirit of a climber who met a horrible death from exposure there many years ago.'

On the other hand, another prominent member of the Cairngorm Club, who asked that his name should not be mentioned, did declare that he thought there was 'something in it'. When asked to dilate on this he merely said: 'It is difficult for one to say how, exactly, one believes in supernatural things.'

Considerable correspondence followed the report and these interviews. All the issues of the *Press and Journal* at that time have been scrutinised, and a cross-section of the opinions expressed in these letters follows.

'CNS', *Press and Journal*, 30 November 1925.

Your most interesting report of the accounts given at the Cairngorm Club of the mysterious dweller on Ben MacDhui makes it clear to the occult student that the 'Big Grey Man' is not a 'ghost' in the ordinary sense, but rather what Indians term a 'Deva' or 'shining one'. These are non-human beings of more power and intelligence than the fairy people who work under them, and every beauty spot and every great mountain has such a presiding genius.

The peak of Slieve-na-Mon, in Ireland, is inhabited by some very remarkable mountain Devas.

Since they are concerned with cultivating the beauty of their little kingdoms, they are as a rule rather hostile to human intruders precisely on account of the destruction and litter referred to by another speaker.

'AM', *Press and Journal*, 8 December 1925.

The writer described an experience with a friend while crossing from Rothiemurchus to Mar by the Lairig Ghru pass, when the mist was so dense that they repeatedly lost the path. Darkness overtook them while they were still in the pass, and they decided to shelter behind a large boulder until dawn. The wind in the meantime had risen to a gale, and as it blew among the high cliffs it brought with it many eerie sounds:

In a period of quietness my friend said he did not want to alarm me, but he was sure we were not alone. He had heard people speaking, and twice seen a light. I also had seen lights, but as they moved and disappeared I took them to arise from straining my eyes to pierce the darkness. We agreed each to call the other's attention when the lights appeared but, after repeated trials, we came to the conclusion that it was eye-strain.

Neither of us had experience of night sounds on a high hill, and though they were eerie enough we concluded they were all natural.

Norman G. Forbes, *Press and Journal*, 8 December 1925.

After some reference to the current correspondence on the Grey Man this writer related the story which an old woman in Rothiemurchus told him about the haunting of the Braeriach plateau by a ghost – seemingly a very physically present ghost for he dragged heavy chains behind him which could be heard clank, clanking over the boulder-strewn plateau. Later in the year he heard the same story from a shepherd whom he had met in the Monadhliaths. The story so aroused his interest that he made enquiries of the stalkers and crofters in Rothiemurchus, but they appeared to have heard nothing of such a ghost. So he left it at that.

It was, however, brought back to him in the wet summer of 1923 when he was again in the district and three English friends begged him to take them to the summit of Braeriach. They made an early start in heavy rain, but by the time they reached the upper bothy in Glen Eanaich the weather had cleared sufficiently for them to commence the climb in comfort.

The mist closed in again as they approached the Eanaich cairn. Progress was very slow, and to interest his friends, whose spirits were beginning to flag, he told them something of the local lore, and, perhaps rather tactlessly, he included the story of the ghost on the plateau they were nearing.

And then, as they climbed higher, there came from above them through the mist a steady clank, clank, not unlike the sound of metal on stones.

In a little, [Forbes wrote], my friends became uneasy and announced that they were too tired to proceed further. I went on hoping to overtake the source of the noise, but the faster I moved the faster the noise travelled before me. At last I struck the bed of a stream, where the going was easier, and, hurrying on, I discovered my ghost with his chain close to some boulders when the mist had thinned – two deer, magnificent specimens, retreating uphill before us. I descended, and told my friends, and, somehow, they were less tired.

Apart, however, from the influence of ghost stories and folk lore in creating a predisposition to belief in unseen presences, the Cairngorms do most certainly have an uncanny power of inducing a feeling of eeriness. And anyone who has stood alone on the summit of Cairngorm at 3.00 a.m., as I did one morning last August, with mist whirling about him, strange sounds coming up from the blackness of Loch A'an, and the recesses of Mheadoin and MacDhui assuming fantastic shapes in his occasional glimpses of them, will agree that Professor Collie's story is not so impossible as it must appear to those who do not know the mountains as we who love them know them. The mind, alone in lonely places, creates many things out of its imagining.

‘OLP’, *Press and Journal*, January 1926.

In whimsical mood ‘OLP’ wondered to whom the ghost of Ben MacDhui might manifest himself but the contemplative, the man of middle age in no hurry, who thinks it better to sit than walk, better to lie than sit; better to dream and sleep than do either. The man with a hobby, the botanist or stone chipper, the naturalist who loves everything, both the quick and the dead, the lover of the picturesque, the poet, the artist – in short the loiterer. Among such as these are to be found the ‘Ghost-seers’! And such a one was ‘OLP’! For more than forty years he had lived within hailing distance of the Ben, and, for this reason, he felt constrained to take up his pen.

From four to ten months each year, from January to December, in all weathers and hours of the day and night, it was his business to roam the hills, taking notes and noticing, and

incidentally to take notes (Bradburys) for so doing. He was a patient man, by training not by nature, and he never allowed business to interfere with pleasure. He had seen wonderful things on the hills; the loves of stag and hind, the deer calf born, an eagle bringing a rabbit to her young, a capercaillie on her eggs, roe deer at play.

These are material things; they can be spoken of, but – ghosts! After all, why not leave 'em alone? Why be for ever sweating after truth when the result, usually, if not positively harmful, is seldom desirable? Try searching for beauty instead!

There is an old saying, 'Seeing is believing', which, being interpreted, means: 'If you see a thing, of course you know it is true'! Now, for more than three fourths of a century I have had lessons (and they were necessary) on the folly of so believing . . .

Then again, among mountains, distances are so vast. Mists gather, dim, darken, and finally obliterate objects; cloud shadows obscure and reveal, diminish and magnify in such a marvellous manner that even the most experienced are confused and occasionally deceived.

Goats white as milk I have seen; as large as cows; beards reaching to the ground: fearsome objects from which I greatly desired to run. Usually a human being is as an ant in those vast solitudes, yet I have seen one on the skyline a gigantic grasshopper on his hind legs, twenty feet high! Recognising me, he waved his arms (or his antennae) in greeting.

Therefore, considering all these things, I have nothing to say on what I may or may not have seen on the mountain, but I am willing to mention one or two things I have heard there.

Hugh D. Welsh also contributed to the press correspondence on the subject at this time, but, in the course of our private discussions, he frequently referred to possible explanations for some of the phenomena encountered, and in one of his last letters to me before he died he wrote:

. . . While I lie awake during the night hours a tide of thought ebbs and flows, and curiously enough a great number take me back to my wanderings on the Cairngorms and the Cuillins. One in particular has been repeated several times, and it is this. Often, when lying out high up on the hill on a gravel or stony stretch one is sometimes conscious, in the quiet, of a faint rustle or whispering, even when there is no appreciable air movement. We put it down to escape of air from the ground due to change of temperature and pressure, or to the movement of percolating water below. If it was caused by the escape of air, this may also give rise to the drifts of thin mist that frequently eddy across the hillside, especially over bare ground, due to the condensation of the released moisture-laden air when coming in contact with a lower temperature . . .

During the next twenty years occasional references to the Grey Man appeared in the press and magazines, including one from Samuel Barton which is of some interest. It appeared in the *Weekly Scotsman* in July 1947.

To the best of my knowledge, [he wrote], the only reputedly 'haunted' mountain in Great Britain is Ben MacDhui, in the Cairngorms, a noble mass 4296 feet in height, just over a hundred feet lower than Ben Nevis . . .

Barton coupled Professor Collie's experience with a passage from Wordsworth's 'Excursion':

I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathing coming after us, and sounds
Of undistinguished motion, steps
Almost as silent as the earth we trod.

He also recalled that in Milton there is a reference to 'airy tongues that syllable men's names' in solitary places.

The people known to himself who had experienced something of this had even less than these poets to go upon. They attributed their strange perturbation to neither voices nor footsteps, and it was not difficult to find those who confessed that the strange fear which beset them was real enough to make them change their plans, or to mar a day's enjoyment.

As an example he mentioned two sisters, sensible, educated, and accustomed to the loneliness of mountains, who landed one day on one of the Hebridean islands. The girl who told him said that the moment they set foot on the island she had an awareness of something 'wrong', and wished they had gone elsewhere. Presently her sister suggested that they had been there long enough. It transpired, after they had regained their boat, that she also had experienced precisely the same awareness of something sinister in the atmosphere of the place.

Barton had been accustomed to mountains in all sorts of weather, and at all hours, but he had never felt, except on one occasion, anything more sinister than the natural eeriness of his environment.

It was on a warm, tranquil afternoon in high summer as he strolled up a wide, grassy apron above Glen Lyon:

Suddenly something happened which turned me cold from head to foot. To describe it is difficult. Close by me there was a sound and a tremor as though somebody heavy had made a leap on the dry turf. It was only a momentary effect, but why it should have so played on me I have never understood. No living thing was anywhere near! I had the basking braes all to myself; there was no lively sheep or cattle-beast to blame. Possibly a loose boulder underground had slightly slipped. Thinking of all kinds of natural explanations, none of which quite met the case, I went on, but the hills seemed in some way estranged from me that afternoon.

When Barton mentioned his experience to a friend he was told of strange incidents which befell the other on a certain occasion when he set out for a day's fishing in one of the burns that flow into Glen Lyon. One thing after another went wrong that day. They came in a steady series of mishaps until he had a growing consciousness of being an intruder. In due course he came to a gully in which lay some strange-looking white quartz boulders, and there he felt so forcibly that he was unwanted that he immediately turned homewards.

Why? All such experiences, Barton thought, may be explained away or rationalised as subjective, but such an explanation would not satisfy everybody.

Perhaps I am too matter-of-fact, [said Barton], but even my own little scare leaves me sceptical about the suggested ghostly reasons for this consciousness of unease that occasionally oppresses the wanderer in lonely places, but of the reality of that unpleasant sensation there is no doubt whatever.

I recall an incident with some affinity to Mr Barton's experience which certainly perturbed me at the time. I was camping one night on the floor of Coire Beannaidh of Braeriach at an altitude of 3000 feet with my son and a nephew, both aged about twelve. The boys were asleep, but I lay wide awake listening to the enchanting music of the mountain. Suddenly I trembled violently from head to foot for a few moments, and lay rigid with fright. Perhaps two minutes passed, and again my whole body shuddered in the same manner. There was no sound other than the rippling of the burn beside us, the whispering of the breeze, and the strange music of high and lonely places.

Fear passed, and reaching the comforting conclusion that I had, perhaps, absorbed an earth tremor, I fell asleep.

It was in 1949, however, that the Grey Man really 'hit the headlines' again, and numerous letters on the subject appeared in the *Weekly Scotsman*. A few have been selected for examination here:

J. W. Herries. May 1949:

The late J. W. Herries, a journalist of repute who has already been mentioned in Chapter 1, warned readers that it would be oversimplifying the problem of the Grey Man to dismiss all the testimony recorded during the years as mere hallucination, since most of the witnesses were realistic and unimaginative individuals:

Is it fantastic to suggest, [he asked], that the rarified air of the heights, and something in the nature of Ben MacDhui itself, have a stimulating effect on the psychic faculty of mankind, ordinarily latent, which opens the way, under favourable circumstances, to an extended range of perception, and makes the lonely mountaineer aware of influences not known to material science?

Is the Grey Man an elemental of Ben MacDhui?

E. R. Beaton. June 1949:

This writer wondered if a possible explanation of the overwhelming sense of fear was due to a subconscious fear already present which the crunching noise releases in full force. Can it be, he asked, that because such incidents as are recorded happen to some and not to others, it is due to their being more psychic? And, as regards the eerie conversation which the two climbers had by the cairn, does it not seem perfectly reasonable that it could not be recollected on a plane nearer earth, where the conditions differed?

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Sir John Anderson, Bart. June 1949:

The late Sir John's theory did not receive support from any quarter, and my letter to him posing a number of questions was acknowledged by his executors:

Ben MacDhui is part of a lost world, and the weird forms that appear there are built up from the vibrations of the original inhabitants, the atmosphere being particularly suited to those with clairvoyant vision.

Captain Sir Hugh Rankin, Bart. June 1949:

Sir Hugh, then of Park House, Blairgowrie, also contributed a letter at this time on his experience which is described in Chapter 4, *The Bodhisattva*.

I asked him in 1963 if he had anything to add to that which had appeared in the press in 1949 and 1959. He replied that there was nothing further to say about the encounter.

On the subject of Bodhisattvas in relation to the Big Grey Man, I had correspondence with two notable Buddhists in 1965 and 1966. One was the Venerable Saddhaloka, who was then leader of the Buddhist Contemplative Community Centre at Eskdalemuir in Dumfriesshire; and the other Mr Christmas Humphreys, QC, a Commissioner of the Central Criminal Court and Recorder of Guildford, who founded The Buddhist Lodge, now The Buddhist Society, London, in 1924.

The Venerable Saddhaloka, despite an agreeable correspondence, was unable to make any constructive pronouncement on Sir Hugh's claim.

Mr Humphreys said that Sir Hugh was a very old friend of the Society, but he had never heard the story before. He added briefly: 'The story is certainly impressive, but may well be something happening to a psychically sensitive person on the psychic plane. More than that I cannot say.'

In a booklet published by the Edinburgh Psychic College in 1949 a few abnormal manifestations on Ben MacDhui are recorded. It is suggested in its Foreword that the physical attributes of Ben MacDhui might create conditions peculiarly favourable to psychic sensibility, so that the range of ordinary perception is extended in certain circumstances, making the individual alive to phenomena on a different plane from the normal. The phenomena reported suggest again the old belief in elementals. The Grey Man of Ben MacDhui may reasonably be included in this category, and the theory propounded that the unusual physical environment reacts powerfully on the human mind, possibly creatively exteriorising the sensations produced.

Two correspondents in the press series of letters in 1949 expressed indignation that such preposterous nonsense should be published in a reputable paper and the credulity of its readers so imposed upon.

Don Hutchison wrote:

. . . I am no mountaineer, but I am perfectly willing to undergo a spell of waiting and watching, or whatever one does, and to declare here and now that *if* I do hear anything of footsteps, it can be explained, and *if* I do see anybody then they will be natural.

Please, for the sake of sanity, publish this letter and challenge.

William C. Sharp was equally sceptic:

I dislike the supernatural told as actual happenings, and consider the printing of them as a waste of good newsprint and type. Such are those weird tales of Ben MacDhui. If they had been written as clever fiction in the form of ghost stories, one could have read them and passed them on with a smile, and maybe a shrug of the shoulders. But to speak of them as real is beyond reason.

As a result of some desultory correspondence about the Grey Man in the press in 1959, Sir Hugh Rankin was interviewed in North Wales by Ian Fraser of the *Press and Journal*, and the gist of that interview has been read in Chapter 3.

The most interesting letter published in the *Press and Journal* at the time was from Lilian Duncan Robb whose short poem about the Grey Man also appears in the above chapter. She wrote:

. . . When we turn to the Bible we find that not only is the existence and activity of good spirits – or angels – taught, but equally clearly taught is the existence of evil spirits – or demons – headed by a personal devil. This subject is still shrouded in mystery, but there can be no doubt in any reflective mind that their existence is real, and they can influence people who yield to them. We are engaged in a conflict – not with flesh and blood – but with spiritual hosts of wickedness.

A barrier has been erected between mankind and the world of demons which can only be penetrated with dire consequences.

Science has demonstrated that there are realities all around us which can neither be seen nor heard by humans – a rather terrifying thought! There are things in the universe which stagger the imagination of man, and far beyond his understanding, but this does not prove that they are not real.

The Ben MacDhui phenomenon again received prominence in the press in 1963, and in August of the same year I was invited by the BBC to broadcast on the subject. This was not the first time that the Grey Man had been featured on radio, nor the last. Twice, in 1968, there were recorded insets in one of the magazine programmes and in 1978 Sydney Scroggie discussed the Big Grey Man and allied subjects with June Wilkie on Scottish Radio.

Correspondence in *The Scotsman* in August and September 1963 was extensive, and one or two of the most interesting letters, and subsequent letters between myself and the writers, and others, are quoted below.

Wendy Wood:

. . . For generations the people of the district have known this ghostly giant, and they are neither stupid nor credulous. It is time for so-called ‘reasonable’ people to realise that there can be strange matters to which we have not yet got the clue.

In a private letter Miss Wood told me that she was very meticulous in uncanny situations, and, as she had no fear, she could usually eliminate each possibility, but she had never on any other occasion felt such a sense of panic as she did during the experience described in Chapter 1. The height of the Grey Man, described as of gigantic proportions, did not really surprise her as it had been verified that the Highlanders used to be of great stature.

. . . Nor can I really see why the spirit of someone who perhaps loved that region should not have left a permanent sort of atom wavelength, or being in another world may not have a sufficiently strong memory thought to make an impression on people who think of the place the same way as he did, or does. It does not seem to me more inexplicable than Second Sight which I have, and which I expect you will agree is undeniable. Both are something about ‘time’ which we have not yet discovered.

The gift of *taibhsearachd*, second sight, extrasensory perception, or whatever you like to call it, has been discussed for generations but without any satisfactory explanation. Hegel, the German philosopher, gave it credence, and Dr Samuel Johnson, among others, was ready to believe but unconvinced. It was not peculiar to the Highlands of Scotland, but it was fairly common within the last hundred years, and is still known to exist today. An old friend in Rothiemurchus, now deceased, had it to a remarkable degree. There may, in fact, be no limit to the range of knowledge acquired through extrasensory perception.

* * *

Hugh Nicol:

The experiences on Ben MacDhui, which had been described in the letters already published, induced Hugh Nicol to recall that Marco Polo had written about sounds in the Desert of Lop. He also recalled that another Venetian, the late Daniel Varè ('The Laughing Diplomat'), suggested in his *Ghosts of the Rialto* (1956), that an explanation of sounds including those of a variety of musical instruments, was given by the Scottish explorer, Brig.-Gen. Clarence Dalrymple Bruce (1862–1934) in his book *In The Footsteps of Marco Polo*, and quoted Varè:

The voices are heard in winter . . . Along the borders of the marshes . . . when you camp for the night you will hear the sounds of musical instruments and drums. They are nothing else than the groaning and thunder of the floes, as the thermometer drops and the ice freezes harder.

Varè also refers in his book to Matt. xii, 43: 'When the unclean spirit is going out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none.'

Yet another subject of the Venetian Republic, the Blessed Odoric of Porone, spoke about a valley where evil spirits dwelt in the rocks: 'And I heard therein sundry kinds of music.'

In the final paragraph of his letter Nicol wrote: 'Bruce's explanation when taken in full, seems to support the contention of Affleck Gray (*The Scotsman*, 23 August 1963) that such montanic experiences as your correspondents have recorded can be accounted for by natural phenomena.'

Philip Tranter:

Philip Tranter, who was tragically killed in a motoring accident in France in 1966, referred in his letter to the points raised by other correspondents about phenomena which are familiar to those accustomed to mountains, and which must have been commonplace to a man like Professor Collie:

. . . To suggest that such phenomena, or any other natural occurrences that may seem strange to a city dweller unversed in the ways of mountains, can have any bearing on the strange problem of Ferla Mór, is merely ignorance.

I myself am quite neutral on the subject, but to explain the Grey Man naturally it is necessary to invoke some phenomenon which occurs very, very seldom indeed, which seems to rule out any of the suggestions so far put forward in your columns. Those who have seen Ferla Mór include some who are neither ignorant, credulous, inexperienced nor uninformed.

W. Kersley Holmes:

Bill Kersley Holmes, poet, journalist, author and artist, better and more affectionately known as 'WKH', died in Alloa after a brief illness in August 1966, aged eighty-four. He was a prodigious writer, and produced between twelve and thirteen thousand poems. His books included two collections of *Ballads of Field and Billet*, and *On Scottish Hills* in which he refers to one memorable day we spent on Braeriach and Cairn Toul, when he was an Army Captain home on leave from the East and I was a youth of eighteen.

A paragraph, from an appreciation written by a friend after his death, epitomised this man of fine character and sensitivity:

He was the exception to the Psalmist's 'Though men come to four score years yet is their strength but labour and sorrow . . .'. The week before he died he climbed Dollar Hill. There was little of the 'labour and sorrow' in the pilgrim of four and four score years.

He had great feeling for the arts, literature, music and painting; and he had, I think, a greater love and reverence for mountains than any other man I ever knew. But he was utterly sceptical about the Grey Man. In his last letter to me before he died he wrote:

. . . My letter as it appeared, was a combination of two, cleverly condensed into one by the editor. I had written separately about the Grey Man and the Brocken Spectre. In one of those letters I had mentioned your name, and a first-rate article from you which appeared in a Glasgow paper, describing eerie phenomena in the Cairngorms and your belief that all had a natural explanation . . .

In one of my letters I suggested that the most mysterious thing to be found amongst mountains was – the human brain, by which I meant that imagination was responsible for anything; they omitted that remark. Still, I know you will agree that some hills seem to have a personality, pleasant or otherwise. I remember being twice on the hill Maya above Glen Clova, and feeling less than the usual pleasure at attaining a new top; then, on one occasion, on another hill in that neighbourhood, I met two girls who had come over Maya, and one of them remarked that she wouldn't like to be on Maya alone . . .

Perhaps it is something in the shape of a hill that can have such an effect? Now, for some reason, I always feel that Ben Lui is friendly – to me at any rate – yet my first ascent of it was alone, and on an appalling day of wind and rain . . .

As to the Grey Man, there is much in what you say, and I suppose that I ought to suspend judgement. But so much nonsense is talked about 'ghosts', without any definition of what the talker means by a 'ghost', that I've grown sceptical. . . . Perhaps it is that I am so impressed by the odd faculties of our own brains, and by realisation of the dignity of the human soul, that I listen to most spook tales with some scepticism. Anyhow, I hope that when I 'pass over' I shan't be asked to return to speak through a trumpet in a darkened room in Glasgow. I'd rather think my spirit were allowed now and then to wander over the Cairngorms, or even the Ochils, a very harmless and friendly ghost – except to litter louts whom I'd scare out of their wits!

Following the newspaper letters in 1963, I had a volume of correspondence with people from all over the country, and abroad, who expressed interest in the subject and

desired to provide whatever information they had.

The Hon. Mrs D. Vivian, Forsinard, had no experience on or near Ben MacDhui, but she thought that an incident which occurred in Glen Tilt might be of some interest.

Along with a friend, she was sitting in a Land Rover on a flat plateau at the head of Glen Tilt, only a few miles from Ben MacDhui. The engine was turned off, and the hand brake hard on. It was about six o'clock on a summer evening. Suddenly the back of the vehicle was lifted up and dumped down with a thud. They jumped out in fright and investigated, but nothing stirred. They were amazed and instantly sensed a sinister atmosphere in the glen.

Could this, she asked, have been a psychical experience, or just an earth tremor?

C. J. Williamson, Scalloway, found the subject fascinating, and wondered if I had noticed any periodicity, or regularity of occurrence in this apparition. If so, he felt that he could put forward a theory which would be helpful. The information available was passed on, and Mr Williamson later propounded his theory.

He was an amateur astronomer and close observer of the sky. He had noticed a periodicity in the appearance of fireballs, and it was noted that on each close approach of Mars to the Earth a particularly bright fireball appeared, and on one occasion fell at midnight on the evening of Mars' closest approach. Whatever the significance of this he was not prepared to say. It might have meant that material floating in the same orbit as Mars got caught in the Earth's gravitational pull, and simply fell to the ground. Or it might have had another meaning.

The recent close approaches of Mars were in 1894–1909, 1924, 1939, 1954 and 1969. From these dates he saw quite good agreement with the dates which I had provided – 1920s, 1940s and 1950s. The first experience, recorded by Professor Collie in the 1880s, could agree, he thought, with the 1879 approach:

Space men, [he wrote], if such there be from extra-terrestrial sources, would, most naturally, shrink from direct contact with populous areas (to begin with at any rate), and would seek the remote uplands to make their reconnoitre.

I offer this as a possible explanation of the strange appearance called the Grey Man . . .

Dr Agnes R. McGregor, Glen Lyon, told me about the experience of a friend, a well-known London professor, on the summit of Ben MacDhui. It was an encounter similar to that of Professor Collie, but neither he nor his companion at the time were able to account for it. It is significant that neither of them had heard of the Grey Man until several months afterwards when the BBC broadcast a feature describing the phenomenon exactly as they had experienced it.

Repeated requests to the Professor for a first-hand account of his experience did not receive any response.

James K. R. Doak lived at Carrbridge for a number of years in his younger days, and knew the Cairngorms intimately. We knew each other well by name, but strangely enough never happened to meet on their broad acres; nor, unfortunately, did we meet

when I rented his old home, 'Crannich', from his sister and resided there for two years during the 1939–45 war.

He also contributed a letter to *The Scotsman* in 1963. Correspondence between us followed, and subsequently we had two very enjoyable and profitable discussions in Pitlochry.

His letter to *The Scotsman* was written to draw if possible some answer vindicating the appearance of the Grey Man in *old local* tradition *before* Professor Collie's time. He was disappointed.

Doak told me that he had experienced numerous frights on Ben MacDhui – but only from snow and blizzard. As far as the Grey Man was concerned, he thought it very odd that none of the old worthies, like Grigor Grant and Bob MacBain, ever mentioned him, and even stranger a man like Uilleam Ruighe Naoimhe (William Rynuie) who really *lived* on the hills.

In a letter he wrote:

. . . If Uilleam Ruighe Naoimhe never meets with the Fear Liath Mór, never mentions him in any of his poems, never hears of the tradition or the name, then one can be quite sure the story is not local, or traditional, or pre-Collie. Then again the Buddhists and their belief in the 'MacDhui Bodhisattva' – have you met any of them, or heard of anything they have seen or heard? They certainly go up to meet him, but what happens then?

I am a firm believer in the Spirit World and would be glad to see the Fear Liath, among other spirit manifestations.

Grigor Grant, but we never knew him as other than 'Grigor Revoan', was a character: a huge man of prodigious strength and appetite with, I recall, an enormous capacity for whisky. He was born and bred in the old family croft of Revoan, which, for the past fifty years and more, has been a bothy much frequented by climbers. Grigor had a close association with the mountains and knew them in all their moods.

I find it strange that although Doak was on the hills a good deal with him and discussed old traditions, he should claim that Grigor knew nothing of the Fear Liath Mór. He certainly did and this has been verified by a Blair Atholl lady, who is a descendant. Most certainly his contemporary, Bob MacBain, Rothiemurchus, with whom I was very friendly in my youth, knew plenty of stories about the Grey Man.

Jim Cameron, who farmed the Mains of Garten, told me before he died that he used to hear his father speak about the 'bochdan'. Also Lachy Rose, Coylum Bridge, another octogenarian, told me in the course of enquiries that his parents used to threaten them with the Fear Liath Mór if the family had been guilty of misbehaviour: 'And my word,' added Lachy, 'it was better than the stick.'

In a private letter Dr Adam Watson of the Grouse Research Council, Banchory, described strange noises coming apparently from the ground when he and his father were ski-ing near the summit of Ben MacDhui. It seemed strange at the time, but he had subsequently heard the same sounds on innumerable occasions both in Arctic Canada and Scotland, and discovered the causative factors:

When snow builds up to a great depth and no one has walked on it, it develops lines of weakness. If a person then walks on the hard snow, it cracks along the lines of weakness; sometimes the crack shows on the surface, and sometimes it occurs underneath and is then invisible. The cracking makes an unusual noise almost like dead leaves swishing in the wind along the ground.

I think it very likely that this sort of natural occurrence, which at the time one has not experienced before, is just the sort of thing to make suggestible men's imaginations run away with them . . .

In spite of camping alone a great deal on Ben MacDhui, Dr Watson had never found it an eerie place, and he thought that one possible reason why people describe the Grey Man on Ben MacDhui and not on other hills may simply be that if one knows that a certain place has an association of this sort, one is more likely to be apprehensive when visiting that place. By contrast, places without any stories do not have this association, so people visiting them do not think along these lines.

I know this to be true in my own case. When I have visited Ben MacDhui summit alone and in mist, and especially in darkness, I have always thought briefly about the Grey Man story, although I never have experienced anything there. On other summits in the Cairngorms I have never had this feeling in similar conditions of weather.

Dr Watson is, perhaps, over-generalising the case. Many would dispute his contention for in many cases the narrators, seemingly honest and sincere, had never heard of anything unusual on Ben MacDhui prior to their visit. Undoubtedly, however, the association of ideas must have had at least some influence on the minds of some who have laid claim to an experience of abnormal phenomena on the mountain.

Ronald W. Clark, the author who is quoted in Chapter 1, declared himself a complete sceptic:

. . . So far as my own position is concerned, I once used to look upon these stories of Grey Men, Grey Women, and Headless Courtiers all rather uncritically. Now, older and (I hope) wiser, I must admit that I can see nothing in the evidence to suggest that the Grey Man is more than a product of mist, light, possibly indigestion, and almost certainly after-dinner euphoria. I am sorry if this disappoints you.

Discussing in a letter the 1943 experience described in an earlier chapter, Alexander Tewnion had this to say in 1966:

To this day I am convinced that I saw something but I am equally convinced that that something was only a towering wisp of mist which I imagined to be a menacing ghost.

He had camped out on Ben MacDhui many times since then, as often in bad weather as good, and as often alone as in company, yet he never again imagined that he saw anything resembling the Grey Man:

In summary I would say my imagination played me a trick in 1943, when for some reason I was in an unusually scary frame of mind. . . . Viewing all the aspects known to me, including Professor Collie's story and various other published accounts, my conclusion is that the Grey Man stories are figments of disordered imaginations . . .

An earlier encounter (1939), of which I have not written elsewhere except in my diary, resolved into my having a 'cuppa tea' with a group of campers near the foot of Sron Riach, the 'Ferla Mór' on that occasion turning out to be

a wavering column of smoke outlined against the darkness of a September midnight sky, while the fire from which the smoke arose was concealed in a hollow beside the tents.

It occurred to me that the physical structure of Ben MacDhui, or its situation in the Cairngorms massif, might conceivably have some bearing on certain of the phenomena experienced, and in this connection I corresponded with Dr Colin Gribble of the Department of Geology, Glasgow University.

Dr Gribble examined the various geological maps of the area, and discovered that Ben MacDhui is situated in the middle of a fairly extensive granite intrusion. These 'batholiths', as they are called, are usually large igneous bodies. Normally they are only exposed to view by prolonged erosion, having originally consolidated several kilometres below the land surface. Another feature is that large granite areas are composed of rocks which, in the main, are homogeneous.

The difference between rock types is small and granite is quite resistant to weathering. It does, however, have a good system of fractures, usually two at right angles running vertically, which causes the granite to crack and eventually disintegrate. Disintegration in turn gives place to screes.

Apart from these well-known granite characteristics Dr Gribble could provide no geological evidence for the Big Grey Man as these characteristics are common to every granite intrusion.

This appeared to be sufficiently conclusive, but on reflection I seized on the words 'crack' and 'screes' and begged for further information on the physical action of disintegration. The reply was as follows:

In order to help with your queries, I have had the relevant pages xeroxed from the first edition of *Principles of Physical Geology* by Arthur Holmes, dealing with screes and rock disintegration. You will notice that audible noises may be heard but these almost invariably occur in dry regions with very large fluctuations in temperatures between night and day. These continual (or sudden) changes in temperature are too much for the rock to cope with, and it cannot adjust to its new conditions quickly enough. So the outer 'skin' of the rock breaks off with a 'cracking' sound. The temperature range must be large, from -40 degrees F. (Night) to 100 degrees + F. (Day), and this is unlikely to occur in this country, but the possibility must be acknowledged.

Screes must lie at particular angles of slope on hillsides (usually about 30° for their angle of repose). Because screes are formed by accumulation of particles of disintegrated rocks, the screes are continually adjusting as the individual particles try to become close packed. The weight of upper scree rocks acts on the material underneath causing it to adjust and change continually. This phenomenon would certainly cause rustling sounds to be heard even if no one is walking on them. Also screes are loose rock lying on solid rock, and if a stream runs down a hillside covered with scree it will flow between the scree and the solid hill, and may cause movement in the lower scree rocks which would eventually be translated through the scree slope, again giving rise to sounds (mostly, slurring, etc.).

A peculiarity of the rock strata near the summit of Ben MacDhui is that as you walk over the rocks, a hollow, echoing sound is audible to some, but not, curiously, to everyone. This may be disconcerting to those who are unfamiliar with the sound.

Mr G. W. Lambert of the Society for Psychical Research, London, who is also quoted in the next chapter, made the following comment on the geological aspect:

. . . In the case of Professor Collie, for example, he was on his way down towards Rothiemurchus and Aviemore, i.e. going north-west. As far as I can judge from the map there is a very steep fall to the glen on that side and an area in which, for that or some other reason, earth tremors and their consequences are more liable to occur than on the neighbouring peaks.

I await your book with interest, as I would like to plot the *loci*, of several incidents on a map of the area, to see whether they follow any recognisable pattern.

In 1962 I made enquiries of the Director-General of the Ordnance Survey, Chessington, Surrey, if any record existed of an unusual experience on Ben MacDhui in the reports of the sappers who carried out the 1847 triangulation, and occupied Ben MacDhui for some time, or in those of the surveyors who were concerned in the 1937 retriangulation. As a matter of interest a stone hut was built to the south-east of the summit cairn by the 1847 party. The ruins are still useful as a partial shelter from storm.

The Director-General's Personal Assistant, Captain B. G. Davies, replied that after an exhaustive search through the files they had failed to discover any reference to the subject.

Mr F. J. Nicholls, who was a member of the 1937 party, also very kindly searched his papers and diaries of thirty years ago, but could find no reference to any abnormal occurrence, and nothing of this nature was reported by the 1963 and 1965 survey sections who also spent some time on the mountain.

With a colleague he had spent days and nights on the summit in snow and mist in June, 1937. They were waiting for a clear night to take observations from their triangulation pillar. They knew about the Grey Man but treated it as a joke. Their only harrowing experience was from wind, and this became so fierce that their tent pole snapped, and they had to scramble out of their sleeping bags in freezing cold, and remove to a less vulnerable spot – the above ruins known as 'The Sappers' and 'Miners Hut'. The Ordnance Survey mapping of Great Britain was started by the Corps of the Royal Engineers. They required something more stable as a shelter than Mr Nicholls's party because they took observations over a period of months, whereas the later party remained only for a few nights.

I certainly did not find anything magnetic about the mountain other than the wonderful view from the summit when the visibility was clear . . .

Mr Nicholls appears to have found nothing magnetic about the mountain; but when the Psychic College report on abnormal occurrences on Ben MacDhui was being prepared a member of the Cairngorm Club reported his experience on the summit when he and his companions were caught in a heavy snowstorm. He recalled that the needle of his compass behaved in a peculiar manner, jerking about violently from side to side.

The narrator and his friends were puzzled, but he does not appear to have implied when telling of his experience that this might have been the work of some supernatural agency. It was not stated that there was an electric storm along with the snow, but it is suggested that the driving snow might conceivably have built up a sufficient charge of static

electricity between the atmosphere and the earth to affect his compass in this manner. Reference has already been made to Professor Wilson in Chapter 3. His earlier discoveries that ions were continuously produced in the air, even in the absence of any obvious ionising agency, led him into a field of study which may conceivably have some bearing on certain disturbing experiences which some mountaineers have had, and failed to understand – atmospheric electricity. He showed that air under normal conditions conducted electricity to a slight extent, and devised a series of electrometers to measure the degrees of static electricity at the earth's surface in fair and disturbed weather, and electric fields and field changes in thunderstorms. To him is due much of our knowledge of the interchange of electricity between the earth and atmosphere, and the explanation of the fact that the electric charge on the earth remains negative and practically constant. His attention was drawn forcibly to the magnitude of the electric field in a thunderstorm and to its sudden change. As he stood on the summit of Carn Mór Dearg he heard a distant rumble of thunder, and suddenly his hair stood on end. He raced down the long scree slope, but before he had gone far the storm broke overhead with a bright flash and loud thunder.

This is sometimes experienced and can be disturbing if the cause is not understood. A personal experience on Sgoran Dubh two years ago was similar, but it was not the first. The ghostly music and voices are inexplicable to Professor Sir Bernard Lovell, Jodrell Bank, who, in a brief correspondence on the subject of sound waves, concluded that while it was all most interesting, he would be surprised if the sounds had anything but an entirely natural manifestation. He felt unable to help with any serious comment, other than to suggest tricks of wind and water.

A number of the most notable Scottish mountaineers of today, whose activities have, in addition to the mountains of home, ranged far beyond these islands, gave me their candid opinions on the Fear Liath Mór. Without exception they place little credence in the phenomenon. I quote one – W. H. Murray:

Like you, I have had no supernatural experience on mountains, nor do I know anyone who has. I know nothing of the Grey Man apart from Norman Collie's experience.

I do not imply by this that I think other people's experiences are invalid. To the contrary I think so-called supernatural experience is proven beyond all reasonable doubt, but I am of the opinion that it is either of natural character, or sub-natural rather than 'above' nature.

By sub-natural I mean effects that are less real than natural because they are less permanent, fleeting in the sense of not being based on anything that endures in time or place.

That Norman Collie had a psychic experience on Ben MacDhui is (for me) certain. To ascribe the cause to a Fear Liath Mór is, however, quite another matter.

The Society for Psychical Research, London, the Edinburgh Psychic College, and the School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University, all evinced interest in the Grey Man enigma, and an exchange of correspondence on the subject occurred with all three. In their view a collection of stories of this kind might prove of great value, whatever view

one may take of their origin, as the collection itself might well help to elucidate the problem.

Mr G. W. Lambert of the London Society, referring to a view expressed in one of his letters that the incidents on Ben MacDhui were probably due to 'natural causes', amplified this statement and observed that they were due not only to natural physical causes, but also to the natural psychological results in observers of such phenomena. In his view two categories of physical 'outdoor' phenomena probably give rise to stories of ghostly occurrences, and those may work separately or in combination, viz.:

1. Some kind of earth movement, a slip or tremor, which causes pulsating sounds like the sound of 'footsteps', and the occasional slight movement of stones.
2. local condensations of water vapour which, owing to the expulsion of cold air from underground and the consequent formation of vortices, form 'shapes' interpreted in some cases as men or giants, in others as animals.

There is no doubt, [he concludes], that some persons are more suggestible than others, and the former, when confronted with an inexplicable noise or other incident, tend to see, by hallucination, some person or thing which seems to 'explain' it. Such seeing is not mere imagination, like that of an ordinary 'mental image', but it is a natural result of the exciting cause.

It looks as if both the above causes were operating from time to time in the Cairngorm Mountains, and the relative popularity of certain peaks as climbs means that the 'favourable' conditions are more often encountered there than elsewhere, and reported. The geology of the different areas may also be more conducive to the occurrence of the conditions in one place rather than in another.

Hamish Corrie expressed some interesting thoughts on the subject.

I have no knowledge of Ben MacDhui, my own climbing having been confined to the Skye Cuillin, but at least one Cuillin peak, Sgurr Dearg, is a truly haunted mountain; a place of extra-sensory hidden forces. I have always felt that, like Ben MacDhui, it has a kind of aura of dread; a shadow of undiscovered and cloudy dooms. Twice, indeed, I have turned back from solo climbing on it in unaccountable panic. It is certainly an uncanny place.

Loch Coruisk was especially dreaded by the old people of Skye. It was the setting of the weirdest tales, and invested with superstitious terrors. In the twilight and darkness it was no place for honest men to be abroad, for the 'little men' emerged from their dwellings in the rocks, and the 'each uisge' from its cave to swim in the clear water. Coire Uisge was also the haunt of the much dreaded Urisk, or Uraisc. The legend of the Uraisc, which has some affinity to the Grey Man, is probably of Norse origin and may be equated with the monstrous being known to the Faroese as the Grýla, and the Gabino which roams the twilight moors of Brittany.

The terrain of the mountainous, sub-arctic Faroe islands must closely resemble the Cairngorm plateau, and Kenneth Williamson has this to say of the Grýla:

'The Grýla itself is a rather mysterious creature, which appears to be a "fikt", that is, of much the same order as the English "bogey".

'Faroese children are warned that if they misbehave the Grýla will get them. One version of a current rhyme runs:

*Down comes a grýla from the mountains
With forty tails, bag on the back, sword in hand
Comes to cut out the bellies of the children
Who are crying for meat in Lent*

'The Grýla has been described as having a shaggy sheep's body but walking upright like a man.

'The Grýla has something in common with the "huldufolk", a shadowy existence in mountain fastnesses, and a capacity for striking fear into the hearts of timid people. You can call them the "hill-men" or "grey men", but if you

do as the Faroese, you will refer to them respectfully as “they”. They are often said to be seen standing on huge rocks or prominent knolls, which are said to be their “homes” .’

Anyone, Corrie feels, who has experienced the weird, staring eyes and horned heads of deer watching him intently in misty twilight, or the grey dawn, must be conscious of the alien sentience and awareness that they convey, and realise how simply such tales can arise.

He recalls that voices; speech in archaic Gaelic; music, including pipe music; all have been mentioned as manifestations of the Ben MacDhui mystery, and have brought out some interesting letters. He refers to the ‘Desert Sound’ in the dead heart of Australia, so-called by C. E. W. Bean, an Australian writer, and calls attention to the ‘Singing Sands’ in the Isle of Eigg.

Here, Corrie is referring to Traigh na Bigeill (literally Sands of the Chirping) at the north end of Laig Bay in Eigg. They were recorded by Hugh Miller, the Cromarty born geologist who gave an account of the phenomenon in *The Cruise of the Betsey*. He described the sound emitted by the sand as a ‘shrill, sonorous note, somewhat resembling that produced by a waxed thread when tightened between the teeth, and tipped by the nail of the forefinger’.

These sands appear under the guise of the ‘Singing Sands of Cladda’ in Josephine Tey’s novel *The Singing Sands*.

There are reported to be sounding sands at Jabel Nakous, three miles south of the Gulf of Suez, and at Reg-Rawan, forty miles north of Kabul, and in parts of the Arabian and Sahara deserts. The sands at Lunan Bay, and on certain beaches in North Wales and Dorset, are said to possess this characteristic under certain conditions.

An article entitled ‘Singing Sands’ by E. R. Yarham appeared in 1956 in *Penguin Science News* No. 39. A distinction is there made between the ‘squeaking’ of beach sands, and the ‘droning’ or ‘beating’ of desert dunes described by travellers (e.g. Philby in Arabia, Tschiffley in Peru, and the missionaries, the Misses French and Cable, in Chinese Turkestan).

In his letter Hamish Corrie goes on to discuss the ‘Great Stone Chute’ of Sgurr Alasdair in the Cuillins, where the friction engendered by loose masses of shattered flints cascading down the chasm produces a resonant sound by no means unmusical. The late Colin Philip, an artist whose knowledge of Skye was encyclopaedic, once suggested for this gully the name ‘Feadan a’ Cloiche’ (Chanter of the Stones or Stone Chanter) because of the echoes aroused in its depths by the scream and rattle of the sliding scree. In the Cuillins there is also Sgurr an Fheadan, the Peak of the Chanter, rising sheer from Coire na Creiche, so-called because of the deeply cut ‘waterpipe gully’ which fissures the Sgurr’s north-facing buttress, cleaving it from crest to base. When the north wind blows it funnels up the gully with a droning sound resembling that of a giant chanter, or bagpipe.

There must, [Corrie's letter continued], be many similar gullies and scree fields in the Cairngorms producing a similar uncanny sound.

If your Grey Man was some sort of manifestation of the Bodhisattva – perfected beings or reincarnated spirits who rule the destinies of the world – why, then, should they diffuse this sinister atmosphere of dread? True, he did not daunt the Rankins serene in their, for some, curiously attractive faith. But I must confess to some philosophic doubt. The subject is absorbing, and I hazard the opinion that Norse rather than Oriental influences are at work here.

When the grey mists gathered on the high hills, the old Norsemen said that 'Rann was stoking his ovens'. Who and what was Rann if not the Spirit of the Peaks, the Elemental, the Dark Winged Azrael of the Heights.

I feel sure you will agree that all of us who have had the experience of climbing in the Highland Mountains know the tricks light and shade can play; how deceptive, in mist and semi-darkness, can be the matter of size, and the apparent distortion resulting at times from fleeting glimpses of otherwise familiar and commonplace objects. Also where the emotions arising from fear and solitude are operating, such illusions and deceptions tend to be enhanced. Added to this, very few people are competent observers, unless there has been something in their training to make them otherwise. Finally there is such a thing as subjective observation, the phenomenon which is wholly unconscious of seeing what the mind wishes one to see.

Even when all these facts are allowed for, there are still a number of others which may account, in part at least, for some of the extraordinary reports though not perhaps for all of them.

Yet, when all is said and done, even when the evidence includes in all probability a welter of optical illusions, hoaxes, hallucinations, and imperfect observations, a hard core of unexplained mysteries seems to remain unsolved and challenging.

Versions of the Grey Man have been described by Vernon C. Boyle in his account of the giant phantom which is said to haunt the North Devon coast, and Quiller-Couch mentions the 'Cankobobus' in his book *Troy Town*.

Strikingly persuasive is *The Middle Kingdom* by D. A. MacManus, who is described as a staunch believer in the ancient and continuing spirit of the countryside. He tackles his subject, the *faerie* world of Ireland, in factual and sober detail, but he is not wholly concerned with *faeries*, spells and witches. He quotes the poet Donagh McDonagh, and gives an account also of hostile elementals and manifestations.

*Crossing the shallow
holding and high above
the sea
Where few birds nest, the
luckless foot may pass
From the bright safety
of experience
Into the terror of the
hungry grass.*

He gives four accounts of demon apparitions, and claims that it would be hard to find stories better authenticated than they are. They are all spine-chilling.

The Orchard Elemental bears a strange affinity to Richard Curle's fox-like apparition, while the Stable Demon is the eerie and unpleasant experience of the author's own father in a stable when he was a boy of fourteen. There he encountered a strange, obscene, squat creature crouched in a compact ball in the corner of the manger. Evil glared from the baleful eyes, blazing like red-hot coals. One awful hand, human-like, but how different!, gripped the edge of the manger. It was a dirty greyish-brown. The

fingers seemed just bone and sinew, and ended, not in human nails, but in curved, pointed claws. The two stable horses were in a mad panic of fear, trembling and snorting with terror at they strained away from this awful ‘something’ in the manger. It was a moment or two before the boy, consumed with dread as he stared at the thing in ghastly fascination, was able to run from the place in terror. It was an experience which he never forgot for the rest of his life.

The scene of The Thing in the Island Garden was Spike Island in Cork Harbour where Mrs Eileen Ganly, an artistic and charming lady well known in the social life of Dublin, lived as a girl. The place itself was believed to be haunted, and had a grim and repelling reputation.

What Mrs Ganly encountered must have been very tall, for it was behind a five foot wall and she could see to its waist. It was roughly of human shape. Except for two dark caverns, which seemed to be its eyes, the whole thing was of one colour, a sort of glistening yellow. She stood motionless in terror, but as the ‘thing’ began to turn its head slowly towards her she overcame her fear sufficiently to turn and run for her very life to a cottage nearby.

‘Oh, Mrs Reilly,’ she cried, shaking all over with shock and terror, ‘I saw something dreadful in the doctor’s garden!’

‘You’re not the first, nor you won’t be the last to see that, Eileen Allanah!’ was Mrs Reilly’s reply.

Mrs Ganly never saw it again, but she learned that it was common knowledge that the garden was haunted by the thing she saw, and which she thought must have been an elemental.

Is the Grey Man also an elemental? Some have sought to disprove such contentions and arrived only at a position less sure than where they started.

‘There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy!’

Dr Hugh N. MacLachlan of Stow wrote:

I have enjoyed this book. It states all the known facts, the myths, and the strange experiences of a great number of people of widely different types. The author never, as so many do, tries to force his opinion down the throat of his reader but leaves the latter to form his own opinion from the data he has collected. The whole book is well laid out and is eminently readable.

Of the many views expressed by all sorts of people who have spoken or written on the subject over many years, I particularly like those of Mr Corrie. He makes a fine and impartial assessment of the matter on this [page](#) *et seq.* So much for the book as a book which may be summed up as very good indeed.

The contributors of ‘experiences’ are quite a different kettle of fish. They range from a group of very intelligent observers of various phenomena to the tellers of tales, with one eye on their public and sales graph. James Doak ([here](#)), Sir Bernard Lovell ([here](#)), Don Hutchison ([here](#)), William Sharp ([here](#)), and a host of notable Scottish mountaineers obviously belong to the first. Those, in my opinion, who come into the second group range from idiocy to plain dishonesty. Indeed in a great many of the reports the conditions of mists, cold, exhaustion and previous knowledge are all present. The exertion under severe cold conditions, altitude with its diminished oxygen supply, and some degree of physical exhaustion all suggest some degree of anaemia of the brain which would inevitably have the effect of rendering judgement less trustworthy even to the extent of giving rise to hallucinations. One remembers the belief by certain RAF personnel in gremlins, which they swore they saw; undoubtedly they did see

them but it was a mental vision not a normal optical one. And I think none the less of these wonderful chaps because of this.

Along with Doak, Sir Bernard and so on are also Sir George Adam Smith, William Garden the advocate, who was President of the Cairngorm Club, and Major Butchart who was the Secretary of Aberdeen University. The first and second of these regarded the Grey Man as perfect nonsense, while the third 'agreed to be negative'. One gentleman, who asked that his name should not be mentioned, 'thought there was something in it'. He also said it was difficult to say how, exactly, one believed in supernatural things. This surely is of no assistance to anyone nor any credit to himself ([here](#)). Dr Agnes R MacGregor told the story of a Professor she knew who had a similar experience to Professor Collie, but alas the Professor never gave the author a first-hand account despite repeated requests to do so. I wish it had been Dr Agnes who had met with the Grey Man, if that is indeed what the reticent Professor had experienced. I know Dr MacGregor and was a pupil of hers at Surgeon's Hall where she was the first woman ever to be elected to a lectureship. She was without exception the most efficient lecturer I ever had and her two-hour class at 8.00 a.m. a model of perfection in the teaching of Pathology. Her opinion would indeed have been worthwhile. Richard Curle's story ([here](#)) far from chilling my spine seemed a lot of twaddle. The poor boy was having a very nasty dream possibly after overeating. In any case how could you hear the footsteps of a fox in snow even if it were wearing a top hat! Then inside the house to have been so distinctly heard the creature must have put on hob-nailed boots too!

The Bodhisattva nonsense is sheer bunkum. Professor Collie's disclosure ([here](#)) took place at a very cheerful social gathering. My experience has been that post-prandial speeches are believed and applauded in direct proportion to the quantity of alcohol consumed by the company. Let's leave it at that! Apart from one superb poem James Hogg was a ridiculous old blether. If he was really terrified at the sight of his enlarged shadow then he was even sillier than I have always thought him, or he was at the bottle more than was his usual habit, and his habit would have given most of us degenerate moderns Delirium Tremens.

Hogg uses the word 'Fahm' and seems to imply some terrifying creature. Jamieson's Scottish Dictionary gives the word as 'Famh' and describes it as a small noxious creature. In Gaelic 'famh', pronounced 'fav', means a mole.

Oft had that seer at break of morn

Beheld the fahm glide o'er the fell.

Well, what was terrifying in that? They glide all over my garden and as a good Jacobite I always say 'health to the little gentleman in black velvet who did so much good to the cause in 1702'.

As I have told you I have seen the Spectre of the Brocken when I was at the top of Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh, or more correctly the spectre of myself complete with halo in glorious technicolour!

Only once have I, and those with me, had a queer feeling of apprehension and what I call dis-ease. It was in 1936 at Laggan Bridge where we were on holiday for August and part of September. Up above the golf course that then existed a long high moor stretched away in the distance. It always had a deep gloomy appearance even on a bright sunny day. Deep blue-blacks and grim-looking greens were the main colours and one could see, so far away on it, cattle that they looked like mice in size. We were always glad when we turned our backs on this view and teed up to drive back in again. It was seen from the farthest out hole on the course. It was always broad daylight when we were there, and several of us, some in their teens and none of us over thirty-five, and yet we all disliked the feel of the place and none of us knew why. I still have no idea why we should all have felt like that, and I never expect to find out.

The Ley Lines Connection

Ley lines are, broadly speaking, straight lines linking hill tops, tumuli, church sites and other places of sanctity. They sometimes appear to correspond with prehistoric tracks. The possibility of ley lines having some relevance to at least a few of the experiences recounted has been discussed at some length with Murdo Grant, Headmaster of Kingussie School, but neither of us claim to have more than a smattering of knowledge on ley lines and it was decided to consult an expert on the subject.

David R. Cowan, Crieff, has spent long years of exhaustive research into the earth energy circuits from cup-marked standing stones and similar which are, it seems, basic to the so-called ley-line system of earth or tellurgic energy. He was most co-operative and provided comments on a few passages from the book. They are, perhaps, somewhat tenuous but well worth recording:

Page 6: *After a while I had the impression of something cold on the top of my neck.* Here you will see a spiral pattern of energy which I find can cause very serious illness where it occurs in places of habitation, and seems to be associated with underground or above ground water. Written about a year ago, it does not mention one of the very few experiences I have had personally. In Nottingham, the proprietor of a hairdressing salon asked me to check out his premises, the employees were, apparently, becoming hysterical from time to time when they entered the shop. Putting it down to female hysteria – I should know better by now! – I nevertheless went along in his car to the shop in a busy street. On entering, I discovered my divining rods picking up the familiar double spiral pattern I had come to associate with illnesses like muscular sclerosis. But this one was much more powerful. Although I am extremely insensitive to these energies, I could only stand in the middle of the shop with my head bowed in the oppressive atmosphere. In shirt sleeves, I stood and shivered, although outside it was one of the warmest days of the year. This feeling of cold is common in these spirals. The proprietor stood there, looking at me inquisitively. ‘So you feel it, too?’ he said. His wife, apparently, would not go up the stairs to the top flat alone, apparently, where the oppressive atmosphere was even worse. Interestingly, he said that the more people in the shop, the less noticeable the effect. It was as though the unpleasant feeling was

shared out among the individuals present. The three qualities were noticed on this occasion: the cold, the oppressive atmosphere, and the sharing of energies. The problem was solved by putting down a spiral of fence wire, which collapsed the noxious energy circuit.

This event occurred after I had given a talk/slide show at a friend's house. Another member of the audience asked me to get rid of a 'ghost' in her house, although she herself had never seen it. This house also had the double spiral just where the 'ghost' was said to have occurred.

Page 9: *The whine was but the result of relaxed eardrums.*

I have encountered a story similar to this in a huge cave near Crieff. This particular cave is actually part of the earth energy circuit, having been man-made for the purpose of collecting earth energy from the surrounding area. I have never been to the Shelter Stone in the Cairngorms, but from the pictures, there seems to be a similarity. Whether the Shelter Stone is also part of the earth energy circuit I do not know. Here is the story as told in my own manuscript:

It can be seen that standing stones work in a number of different ways. From here it travels in a north-easterly direction, over the top of the Blue Craigs until it reaches the Covenanters' Stone and the site of another church, this time the very, very old, the Kirk of the Grove. The word 'Grove' at the focal point of this system would have delighted Alfred Watkins, since his study of trees led him to understand that any place with this word included was on a ley stream. There is, I believe, a woodland sanctuary to the south of the country called Medlonemeton, which has yet to be located, one of the Iron Age Druid groves.

The Covenanters' Stone, just a few metres away, is an impressive man-made cave, built from several large boulders, the main one being a huge five metre square block, with another five large slabs placed against it to form a cave high enough in which to stand upright, with room to spare. Not surprisingly this cavern attracts the cup-mark energy from a wide area, and is the core, the nucleus of the energy system for a large area of Scotland. The structure is primitive, the size impressive, and for many years was thought to have been natural, since it appeared to serve no purpose, and it seemed inconceivable that it could have been erected by stone-age man. Since it is the focal point of the system, with energy of different types associated with it, it is not surprising that there is at least one paranormal story attached to it. Many researchers before now have discovered that it is mainly at the crossing points of telluric energy that unusual incidents occur.

The shepherd who supervises this area told me that he climbed up to the Covenanters' Stone one warm summer's day to check if there were any dead sheep inside. His employer had instructed him to keep a special look-out here, since a number of sheep had, in the past, chosen this place to die. With his faithful collie at his heels he entered the cave and was rather startled to hear a moaning sound, as if a high wind was souging round the massive boulders. But it was a hot day, hot enough for him to be in shirt sleeves, and not a breath of wind in the air. His collie, meantime, remained at the entrance, ears back and cowed, refusing to go any further. Possibly, in this cave, the cave was resonating with telluric energy, which may have, for some reason, been at an unusually high level.

Page 18: *I was seized with such terror that I turned and in panic fled back along the path . . . to Coylumbridge and*

Page 50: *They had just reached The Pools (of Dee) and stopped to rest when they felt the 'Presence' behind them.*

The energy from a cup-marked standing stone which has been the object of my attention for some years, has been found to be similar to the cup-marked shapes on the stone. I have no doubt that you are aware of these ancient markings, pecked out by our ancestors

some three or four thousand years ago. Simply put, they are maps of patterns of telluric or earth energy across the face of the planet. They have several facets of interest in the context of the Pools of Dee, bridges, and hill passes. This energy is still ‘working’, and travels across the country in roughly circular patterns of energy, easily followed with divining rods. They ‘tune in’ to lochs, travelling through their centre, and also follow up a pass or bealach, always following the easiest route. They are designed to go through Pre-Reformation burial-grounds, ancient shielings, castles, standing stones or individual cists and also pass accurately beneath bridges, ancient and modern, built of wood, stone, or iron. This is because these bridges cast a double spiral of energy from their foundations at each side of the river, making a very efficient ‘net’ of electro-magnetic energies to capture the wandering cup-mark energy. The outer part of this cup-mark energy is actually comprised of a number of waves of energy, roughly about a yard between them, the distance between each individual wave of energy gradually decreasing, until the outer ‘working’ edge is reached. This is the energy which actively seeks out the bridges, burial-grounds and so on. In the case of the lady who was seized with terror, it may be that she happened to be in that spiral of energy which, of course, passes through the old burial-grounds, giving Heaven knows what effect, and by chance, managed to run through the working edge of the cup-mark energy passing through the centre of the bridge. This is similar to Burns’ ‘Tam O’Shanter’ when he rode Cutty Sark across the bridge, knowing that once he passed the keystone on the bridge (out of the cup-mark energy), he would be safe.

Page 54: . . . *the family heard distinct singing in Latin from the roofless Chapel.*

Sounds of this nature are relatively common in old buildings. Don Robins, who is co-authoring my proposed book, is bringing out his own book in a few months. He is working on the theory that the fabric, the stonework of buildings can retain the memory of sounds in the crystal lattice of the stone itself, being replayed many years later. He is an archaeologist and a scientist, having published a book *Circles of Silence* some years ago. It was he who discovered that standing stones emit ultrasound at dawn and sunset, against all the known principles of physics. The name of his next book escapes me for the moment. He originally intended to call it *Echoes of Stone*, but, fortunately, I was able to tell him that Magnus Magnusson already had a book out with that title.

Page 69: *The footprints in the snow.*

My knowledge of science and meteorology is very limited, but there may be more than one explanation. Could it possibly have been a small cometoid, or part of one, which entered the earth’s atmosphere, shedding blobs of water as it melted with the friction? There are a number of stories of large pieces of ice falling from the sky, even before aircraft were able to fly high enough.

Page 103: *The back of the vehicle (Land Rover) was lifted up and dumped down with a thud.*

Some of these stories I have heard smack of hoaxes by male companions. The nearest I have heard to this is of an archaeologist, John Sharkey, who mentioned in his book *The*

Road Through the Isles published by Wildwood House, that he had been sitting inside a burial chamber, listening to the tick of a geiger counter, when he was suddenly picked up by some invisible force and flung violently into the opposite corner with enough energy for him to seek hospital treatment, I think. There was no one or anything else anywhere near him at the time, and, reading through the book, one is struck by his open-mindedness on the subject of earth energies. If I had my way, *every* scientist and archaeologist would be picked up by some unseen force, given a good shake and dumped back down on the ground! Perhaps then we would have less scepticism and a more energetic look into the hidden worlds around us.

Some Conclusions

Ma's breug bhuam e, is breug dhomh e.

(Gaelic saying)

(If it be a lie as told by me, it is a lie as given to me.)

The Big Grey Man phenomenon has been summarily dismissed by many as a myth arising wholly from Professor Collie's disclosure of his experience, with all its attendant publicity, in 1925 and 1926, and played upon from that date by various climbers whose claims to have had experiences of a similar nature were entirely spurious. This is not, however, altogether acceptable because, despite the fact that understandably much more has been heard of the Grey Man post-Collie, there appears to be evidence, however slim and however difficult to substantiate, that the phenomenon was pre-Collie for the following reasons:

1. The Gaelic name, in a district where the language has barely survived the past fifty years, is surely significant, and suggests that there must have been a local tradition about it.
2. Hugh Welsh's enquiry of John Mackintosh, Luibeg, in 1904 about slurring footsteps on Ben MacDhui and Mackintosh's reply, jocular or otherwise ([here](#)): 'That would have been the Fear Liath Mór you had heard.' Collie revealed his experience in 1925. He had done so earlier in New Zealand at the turn of the century, but the story does not appear to have attracted any attention in this country. In any case it is highly improbable since a figure, grey or any other colour, did not intrude in his experience, and also he was not a Gaelic speaker. The question therefore is, and unfortunately it cannot be answered, where did Mackintosh hear the name?
3. The experience of a stalker friend related by George A. Hall in *Leaves from a Rambler's Diary* (p 15) occurred also about the beginning of the century, and it is perhaps significant that Mr Hall records his astonishment to have read some years later of Collie's experience.
4. Collie's flight from the mountain in terror was in the year 1891. He confided in Dr Kellas in 1903 the strange fear which had possessed him, and he was surprised to learn that Kellas and his brother also had an experience which had caused them to leave the mountain in fear – *circa* 1900.
5. The reaction of an old Rothiemurchus native who was told of Kellas's experience some years later: 'Och aye, that would have been the Fear Liath Mór he would have been seeing.'

In *Highways and Byways of the Central Highlands*, Seton Gordon recalls that the Marquess of Ailsa told him that he used to hear about the spectre when he visited Castle Grant at the close of the nineteenth century. Mr Gordon, who lived at Aviemore from 1921 to 1931 and spent much of his time on the Cairngorms, told me that his interest had been aroused by Collie's story, and that he had made many enquiries at the time of local inhabitants, but without much success. It is not inconceivable, however, that the people whom he questioned might have been shy of revealing any knowledge or belief in the Grey Man to a non-native, in the same manner as so many in the district at that time held the ridiculously negative belief that to admit to any knowledge of the Gaelic language was tantamount to a confession of illiteracy.

The Mackenzies of Whitewell, for example, were well known to Mr Gordon, and there was a tradition handed down in the family, which had been resident in Rothiemurchus for generations, that the Grey Man was the ghost of an ancestor who said in one of his poems that he would 'come again'. To the end of her days my old friend the late

Carrie Mackenzie (Mrs Nethersole-Thompson) was unshakeable in her conviction that the ghost of her ancestor, Uilleam Ruighe Naoimhe (Rynuié) (William Smith), haunts the Ben MacDhui area.

William Rynuié, to use the anglicised form of Ruighe Naoimhe (Place of Saints), the name of his croft in Tulloch, was a native of the Parish of Abernethy. He was a man of bold and resolute character, with a powerful physique capable of enduring any amount of fatigue and exposure. He was a renowned deer stalker and professional poacher who, with the connivance of the Laird of Rothiemurchus it was said, made a practice of raiding the Forest of Mar. His stalking bothy was on Derry Cairngorm, adjacent to Ben MacDhui, and the distinct 'fail' foundation may still be seen in a sheltered nook of the stream that runs out of Lochan Uaine.

Legend has it that he perished in an avalanche in the Garbh Choire Mór of Braeriach. In actual fact, he was finally compelled to abandon his lawless way of life, and joined the Army. He served under Sir John Moore, and died at Portsmouth shortly after the disastrous retreat from Corunna.

He was a nature lover, philosopher and poet – indeed he was called the Cairngorm Poet – and his songs breathe the essence of poetry. The composition of 'Aig Allt an Lochan Uaine' (By the Stream of the Green Loch) is particularly beautiful, and was declared faultless by the most competent critics of the time. It is the Stalker's Dream

—
*Aig Allt an Lochan Uaine,
Bha mi uair 'tamh,
Ged bha 'n t-aite fuar
Bha 'n fhardach fuasach blath,
Ged thigeadh gaoth 'o thuath orm
'Us cathadh luath o'n aird,
Bha Allt an Lochan Uaine,
Le' fhuaim ga m'chuir gu pramh.*

(By the stream of the Green Loch, I once had my lonely dwelling, and although the situation was cold the interior was remarkably warm, and although the piercing north winds often blew the drifting snow from the brows of the mountain, the gurgling of the frozen stream soothed my weary eyes to sleep.)

Perhaps significantly there is no mention of the Fear Liath Mór in any of his songs or poems.

It is a matter of regret to me now that some of the records I took of the tales that old men of the Strathspey side of the mountains, including my grandfather, told me in my youth have vanished, and memory disappointingly fails to recall those that would have much bearing on the Grey Man.

On the Mar side reference has been made to the brief reply of John Mackintosh, Luibeg, to Hugh Welsh's enquiry about footsteps on the Ben. On further enquiry Mackintosh could not, or would not, expand on the subject; nor could his contemporary at the Derry, Donald Fraser. But it is clear that the name at least, if nothing else, was known on that side of the range.

So much for the evidence in support of a legend dating back to earlier times. It is meagre, and barely sufficient to satisfy the critical mind.

Contrarily the claim appears twice in print that the phenomenon has figured in Deeside legendary lore for centuries, and that it has been a subject for discussion on the Strathspey side from time immemorial. These claims do not, however, appear to be capable of substantiation. In fact there is a disappointing lack of reference to the subject in the old books on legends of the district which are now long since out of print. Yet the legends of the Bodach Lamh Dhiarg (the Spectre of the Bloody Hand), Domhnall Mór

(Big Donald, the King of the Fairies), the Bodach Cleócan Deirg (the Spectre of the Red Cloak) and others receive prominence.

One would have expected also that if it had been so much a subject of disquisition the peripatetic Revd Thomas Grierson, Minister of Kirkbean, the author of *Autumnal Rambles Among The Scottish Mountains Or Pedestrian Tourist's Friend*, would almost certainly have seized greedily upon it and given it prominence in his book. It is perhaps interesting to recall that he spent a fortnight on Deeside in 1850, spent the night of 28 August with Peter McHardy, who was then the stalker at either the Derry or Luibeg, and reached the summit of Ben MacDhui the following day in a blizzard. An old lady at the Victoria Bridge cottage (Mar Lodge) to whom he had confided his purpose the previous day commented acidly: 'Wi' leave Sir, I think ye're o'er het at hame!' Inkson McConnochie, an experienced mountaineer and careful observer, who was for a period Secretary of the Cairngorm Club, surprisingly makes no mention of the Grey Man in his book *Ben MacDhui and His Neighbours*. The subject figures in a number of more recent books but briefly only.

The late Lt-Col J. P. Grant of Rothiemurchus, whose ancestry in Rothiemurchus dates back to 1570, was conversant with the folklore of the district, but he told me that he knew nothing about the Grey Man except what he had read in the press. His opinion was that the story had become confused with the legend of the Bodach Lamh Dhiarg. The present Lt-Col Grant has nothing to add to what his father said.

Except for the brief flash of recognition from John Mackintosh, Luibeg, in 1904, there is no record that any of the stalkers at the Derry or Luibeg, or deer watchers in the Corrour bothy from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present day – Peter McHardy, John MacKintosh, Donald Fraser, John Mitchell, Donald Scott, Charles Robertson, John Mackintosh the Piper, John McLaren, Ronald MacDonald, Peter Millar, Ronald Scott, Sandy MacDonald the 'Brocach', Sandy Grant, Iain Grant, Frank Scott – ever mentioned the Grey Man phenomena unless those of the post-1925 period, and then only in the context of the current stories which followed Collie's disclosure.

Charlie Robertson, who occupied Corrour bothy as watcher from July until the end of the stalking season from approximately 1900 to 1912, never once mentioned the Grey Man as far as we know. Hugh Welsh told me:

I knew Corrour well, from my first visit in 1900 when old Charlie Robertson from Inverey was there as keeper from the beginning of July until the end of the stalking season . . . Many an evening – and sometimes a night – we spent with Charlie, us sitting on the floor in front of a blazing fire, sparks flying up the chimney, and the wind roaring round the house, and Charlie relaxed in his chair with a large glass of whisky in his hand. We learned a lot from him, for he was well-read, and his tales of guided parties, and others, and his own outlook were most interesting. But there was never a mention of the Grey Man. Each weekend he left the bothy on Saturday to go home to Inverey, to attend Chapel in Braemar on Sunday, returning to Corrour Bothy on Monday – no matter what the weather conditions were. We have seen him crossing the Dee at the 'stepping stones' in spate, with the water well above knee-depths, on his way to the Derry. The bothy was never locked during the weekend – 'someone might be in need of shelter' was his thought – and the facility was respected, though on one occasion on his return he found all reserve of food gone, most of the firewood used, and the place left in a mess. It meant an immediate return to Derry for supplies.

The reply given to Alistair Borthwick by one of a group of stalkers whom he questioned about the Grey Man ([here](#)) – ‘We do not talk about that’ – might well have been given by a very old friend of mine who was head stalker at the Derry at the time. It would have been said in his customary grave manner but – I just wonder if perhaps an elusive twinkle in his eye escaped observation!

The late Iain Grant, Inverey, one of my oldest friends and companion of a few ploys, who was stalker at Luibeg with his father from 1926 to 1937, and whose faculties of observation and analysis of natural phenomena were more acute than most, scorned the suggestion of anything of a supernatural nature on Ben MacDhui, and pointed significantly to the complete lack of reference to the phenomenon in the collected legends of, in particular, either Grant or Shaw. His view was that the people most likely to have had ‘experiences’ at that time, but who recorded precisely nothing, were the searchers for Cairngorm stones who usually slept out on the hill in their plaids. A notable and prodigious searcher was a woman called ‘A’ Chailleach nan Clach’ (the Old Woman of the Stones), who, on being asked if she was not afraid to sleep up there, replied that she knew of nothing to be afraid of.

If any man was entitled to make the acquaintance of the Grey Man it was Iain Grant, for he knew the Mar side of the mountains, perhaps more intimately than any, in all weathers and in all seasons of the year, but his experiences were circumscribed by natural phenomena only. Except one, and this, although we were in general agreed upon most other things regarding the Grey Man, remained a bone of contention between us. He could not explain why, on leaving the summit of Ben MacDhui one moonlit winter’s night, Jock, his Scotch terrier, who was ranging about beyond him, suddenly raced to heel in a state of unease, and remained there until they were well down the mountain. Knowing something about Jock’s character his fright was certainly not caused by anything on foot or wing within his sight or smell range.

Donald Stewart, Pitlochry, who has already been quoted in a previous chapter, recalls similar behaviour in his retriever in the autumn of 1939 when he was going up the rough track from Inchrory Lodge to Lagganald, the stalker’s house.

The dog was ranging about fifteen yards ahead of him when he suddenly whimpered, turned tail, and shot past at full speed. Donald returned to the Lodge perplexed, and found him crouched up against the back door trembling with terror. Putting him on a lead they again set off homewards, but nothing would persuade the dog to pass the spot where he had been affected by something unseen and unheard by his master, and they had to make a detour. From that night he would never pass the spot even in daylight. Many instances of such behaviour in animals have been recorded, and the conclusion is that they appear to be sensitive to influences which are beyond the range of human perception.

Donald also recalls that his aunt who kept house for him at the time had a strange experience at the same spot, but she refused to talk about it. After dark she would never

go alone from Lagganald to the Lodge.

It is far from my intention to denigrate those whose experiences have been recounted with sincerity and conviction, and who, because of the intensity of emotion engendered at the time, are unshakeable in their belief that there does exist on Ben MacDhui a strange influence which is wholly inimical, and apart from this world; or light-heartedly to attempt the debunking of an extremely live legend. If, however, the explanation of certain phenomena is based on a sound premise the explanation should surely be presented, and it certainly seems possible, at the risk of being accused of meagre imaginative powers, and a dull rationalism that seeks to find an explanation for all things on heaven and earth, to suggest a logical explanation for at least some of the experiences which have been recounted.

I cannot help reflecting, knowing those mountains as intimately as I do, and having spent as much time on them alone as anyone, and perhaps more than most, that I have never been able to record one incident which, by any stretch of the imagination, could be described as savouring of the supernatural. Indeed, if I had an awareness sometimes of being not alone in lonely places the feeling was wholly benign, and I always had the strange conviction, which might well have been a peculiar conceit but which I never had on other mountains, that no harm would ever befall me on the Cairngorms. Many of my friends, mountain-wise and knowledgeable in the Cairngorms, are similarly lacking in experiences. Strange perhaps, but certainly not an argument that because of this the experience of others is necessarily a farrago of nonsense. In some quarters we would be described as physically insensitive, or singularly lacking in extra-sensory perception. And it may be so.

I remain, however, unrepentant of the opinion which I have held for many years that, discounting the palpable falsehoods which have sometimes appeared in the press in the form of richly embellished re-hashes of old stories, many of the terrifying experiences have been the result of hysteria, or self-induced hypnosis in minds absorbed with stories of the Grey Man, and aggravated by agoraphobia, fatigue, debility, or morbid sensitivity; in other words, it would appear that some of the narrators experienced exactly what they wished to experience, or had become a prey to uncontrollable imagination. There is, however, testimony which cannot be ignored, and even although psychic phenomena are so often attributed to the activities of the sub-conscious they still do not escape from the actual. They cannot, therefore, be impatiently discarded as emanating from abnormal brains without further research, and it is readily conceded that there does appear to be an area of mystery which has so far defied explanation by anyone.

If one indulges in animistic theories the possibilities of self-deception are infinite. I have experienced fear on many occasions in the Cairngorms – briefly, perhaps, until reason assured me that what I dreaded was tangibly of the earth – but fear which might have become the force of overmastering terror. Perhaps, since the decline of belief in the supernatural, those born of the mountains are less liable to place a supernatural

interpretation on unfamiliar natural phenomena than others. Yet, loneliness in remote parts engenders so many opportunities for the imagination to play fast and loose with rationalism, and in mountain country it is perhaps more likely to occur than elsewhere. Despite the fact that you may be well inured to solitude, there are moments when hearing suddenly sharpens to sounds which momentarily rise above the pentatonic dirge of the wind, and create an illusion of demoniac furies in mad hunt. In unquiet places impregnated with age-old superstitions, and in the gathering gloom of night, or the breaking dawn, dark, primeval faces seem to stare down from the cliffs, and grey, amorphous shadows without features seem to flit from rock to rock. You may be aggressively healthy and free from the bondage of superstition, a subject unlikely to be the victim of hallucination, but for a moment you may become acutely aware of a presence which seems sometimes to take a visible, bodily form, and your ears become sharp as a wild animal's with fear. It is conceivable that at this point, confronted with the intangible and incomprehensible, terror is triggered off and an insensate dread of the unknown takes possession; the dead rock of superstition and blind fear, the crudely supernatural, and belief in what is patently impossible exercises complete control; feeling becomes numb, and the body lives without the brain. Self-hypnosis quickened by the inheritance of age-old dreads could do the rest, and the only refuge – flight from the mountains; perhaps after all only an *alter ego* dogging the footsteps!

It is remarkable how easily, especially in the twilight solitudes of mountains, the most rationally minded can be deceived without trickery. The explanation is perhaps quite simple. As the eyes move from side to side in a light which is barely strong enough for distinct vision, striving to register the imagined figure, it naturally seems shadowy and indistinct, and appears to move as the eyes move. When dimly observed an inanimate object, whose different parts reflect varying degrees of light, may enable the observer to retain it in view by its brighter parts, but the disappearance and reappearance of the fainter parts, and consequent alteration in shape will necessarily give it the semblance of animation. If the observer fails to appreciate this, the mind may instantly attribute to it a supernatural existence. In the same way a human figure observed in half light may also undergo these changes, and after being seen while in a favourable position for receiving and reflecting light it may suddenly disappear in a position before and within reach of the observer's eye. In the circumstances it is difficult for the mind to efface the impression which it cannot fail to receive.

*By oldest time regions consecrate;
And while the mists flying and rainy
Vapours call out shapes
And phantoms from the crags and solid Earth.*

(Wordsworth)

I recall moments of apprehension in the Lairig an Laoigh Pass resulting from just such an illusion. I had crossed the shoulder of Ben Bynack Mór in darkness, and having forded the A'an, met the breaking dawn as I passed the Dubh Lochan. Suddenly I

stopped short in my tracks and, with a quick intake of breath, gazed in consternation at an enormous figure astride the track a little distance ahead. The more I gazed the more its movements became menacing, and for a moment or two I was paralysed with fear. Then I lay flat on my stomach and brought 'the monster' in silhouette against the sharpening sky-line – and breathed freely again! A huge red granite boulder, fringed with greyish-black lichen on its outer edges and with tentacles spread inwards, lay beside the track, and the simple cause of the illusion of movement was created by the reflection of light from its lighter coloured parts!

Apparitions may be spectres emanating from within the brain, and not from any outward manifestation, because in ill-health or upset digestive functions, or allied causes, images may be produced on the brain and nerves of the eye. Or it may be an association of ideas resulting from agoraphobia. A rational explanation may be as Sir David Brewster said long ago:

. . . the mind's eye is really the body's eye, and the retina is the common tablet upon which impressions are painted, and by means of which they receive their visual existence according to the same optical laws. Pictures of the mind and spectral illusions are equally impressions upon the retina, and only differ in the degree of vividness with which they are seen.

Many incontrovertible assertions have been made about apparitions but they may well be traceable to mental impressions, or physical affection.

The late Frank Smythe's experience on Everest may be cited as an example.

In the course of the 1933–34 Everest Expedition when Frank Smythe and Eric Shipton attempted the final onslaught on the summit, and had reached a height of about 27 500 feet, Shipton suddenly succumbed to stomach trouble and, wisely guided by the old axiom that no man should go on until he collapsed of exhaustion and involved others in disaster, he decided to retreat to Camp VI. It was a bitter disappointment to both for the chance of success, already minimised by a late start and the difficult condition of the mountain, was now almost eliminated. Hypothetical cases of similar circumstances had already been discussed on their journey across Tibet, and it was agreed that Smythe should continue alone. Mountaineering history records his defeat at 28 000 feet.

What interests us here, however, is to recall the two curious phenomena which he experienced during his solitary climb, as described in *Everest 1933–34*.

He refers to them with diffidence, and prefers to describe the circumstances only without drawing any inference from them. He is at some pains to emphasise the instances on record where men under physical and mental strain have experienced strange things on mountains. He mentions the effects of oxygen-starvation in the brain which are extremely complex, and refers to Wyn Harris's nightmares as a case in point. The first phenomenon is by no means unique, and has been frequently experienced by lone climbers and travellers in remote places:

All the time that I was climbing alone I had a strong feeling that I was accompanied by a second person. This feeling was so strong that it completely eliminated all loneliness I might otherwise have felt. It even seemed that I

was tied to my 'companion' by a rope, and that if I slipped 'he' would hold me. I remember constantly glancing back over my shoulder, and once, when after reaching my highest point, I stopped to try and eat some mint cake, I carefully divided it and turned round with one half in my hand. It was almost a shock to find no one to whom to give it. It seemed to me that this 'presence' was a strong, helpful and friendly one, and it was not until Camp VI was sighted that the link connecting me, as it seemed at the time to be beyond, was snapped, and, although Shipton and the camp were but a few yards away, I suddenly felt alone.

The second phenomenon was completely baffling. It might possibly have been an optical illusion, but Smythe felt convinced that it was not.

He was about 200 feet above Camp VI, and a considerable distance horizontally from it. As he glanced in the direction of the north ridge he was surprised to see two curious-looking objects hovering motionless in the sky. They were dark in colour, and like kite-balloons in shape, but differed from each other in two respects. One possessed what seemed to be short under-developed wings: the other, a beak-like protuberance. They were sharply silhouetted against the sky, and despite lack of motion they appeared to pulsate. Smythe noted that the rate was much slower than his own heartbeat, and this is of some interest if it was an optical illusion.

So interested was I that I stopped to observe them. My brain appeared to be working normally, and I deliberately put myself through a series of tests. First of all I glanced away. The objects did not follow my vision, but they were still there when I looked back again. Then I looked away again, and this time identified by name a number of peaks, valleys and glaciers by way of a mental test. But when I looked back again, the objects still confronted me. At this time I gave them up as a bad job, but just as I was starting to move again a mist suddenly drifted across. Gradually they disappeared behind it, and when a minute or two later it had drifted clear, exposing the whole of the north ridge once more, they had vanished as mysteriously as they came. It may be of interest to some that their position was roughly midway between the position of the 1924 Camp VI and the north-east shoulder. Thus, they were at a height of about 27 200 feet.

In *The Mountain Vision* Smythe discusses superstitious fears, and speculates on their effect on the mountaineers of his generation. No matter how vigorously these fears may be decried it is undeniable that, having been handed down for countless generations, they still linger in the subconscious memory, and have some relationship to our feeling for the mountains.

Even the Alps still boast their ghosts. I remember reading a note in the visitors' book at the Baltschieder hut in the Bernese Oberland to the effect that a party spending a night there had been unable to sleep because of a ghost which persisted in perambulating the hut, an assertion which had considerable force lent to it when my companion and I, who had spent days there without seeing a soul, came upon some footmarks that began and ended nowhere. No doubt there was a perfectly logical explanation, but at the time it certainly seemed a trifle weird.

In his book Smythe recalls that a number of mountaineering parties had reported the imagined presence of an additional member, and instances his own experience when climbing the Brenva face of Mont Blanc with Professor Graham Brown in 1927. When he was alone on Everest in 1933 he experienced the phenomenon with even greater force as already described.

Nervous tension, fatigue and lack of oxygen are probable explanations. Under certain conditions a man may experience a state of dual personality. In Smythe's case the impression received, during the only serious fall he ever had on a mountain, was one of complete detachment. It was as if he stood aside from himself and watched his body falling, apparently to self-destruction, with no more emotion than if it were a bundle of rags being thrown into the dustbin.

While imagination and the stress of the moment is in one sense an adequate explanation, he reasoned, it is equally logical to suppose that under certain conditions a man is sensitive to phenomena normally unfelt and unseen. Psychical research has established too many facts under rigorous scientific conditions for any man to dismiss phenomena physically inexplicable as imagination or nonsense.

It is perhaps unusual for anyone to suffer from hallucinations as a result of oxygen-starved tissues in the brain at a moderate altitude of 4000 feet, but it might occur. I have at least had the experience of men journeying quickly from sea level to this height suffering from giddiness and sickness, and in one case bleeding from the nose and ears. In the same context the late John Buchan may also be quoted from *Memory Hold The Door*, in which he describes an experience which he declared that he would not forget. It happened in the Bavarian Wettersteingebirge above Partenkirchen in 1910. One June morning about 2.00 a.m. he set out to climb the Alpspitze with a young Forester called Sebastian. After reaching the summit they descended to a little mountain inn, and after breakfasting there they began the six mile walk to the valley below through pleasant pine woods and alpine meadows. It was a brilliant day with the promise of great heat. Buchan paid little attention for a moment or two to his companion, until glancing at him he was amazed to see the sudden transformation of his face. He was deathly white, sweat beaded his forehead, and his eyes stared straight ahead as if terror surrounded him on all sides, and he dared look neither to right nor to left.

Suddenly he began to run, and I ran too, some power not myself constraining me. Terror had seized me also, but I did not know what I dreaded; it was like the epidemic of giggling which overcomes children who have no wish to laugh. We ran – we ran like demented bacchanals, tearing down the glades, leaping rocks bursting through thickets, colliding with trees, sometimes colliding with each other, and all the time we never uttered a sound. At last we fetched up beside the much-frequented valley highway, where we lay for a time utterly exhausted. For the rest of the road home we did not speak; we did not even dare to look at each other.

What was the cause? I suppose it was panic. Sebastian had seen the goatfoot god, or something of the kind – he was forest born, and Bavarian peasants are very near primeval things – and he had made me feel his terror. I have never had any similar experience, but a friend of mine had something like it in Norway. He was alone, climbing in the Jotunheim, and suddenly in a wild upland glen the terror of space and solitude came upon him. He ran for dear life, crossed a considerable range of mountains, and at last reached a saeter. There was no one in the place, but there were cattle, and he found sanctuary in a byre, where he nuzzled his face into the neck of a most astonished cow!

Hamish Corrie, whose interest was particularly aroused by the press correspondence in 1963, and who, as already mentioned, was a stimulating correspondent on the subject, made the following observations:

The problems, including the exact spatial location of the apparition, seem to present well-nigh insuperable difficulties. While I do not have your experience, or advantage or having, over the years, scrutinised a variety of reports, some conflicting no doubt, I am wondering whether anyone has tried to give some serious philosophical thought to the questions: 'Who or what is the Fear Liath Mór'? Are there some natural, and hence explicable phenomena behind these odd manifestations – the Brocken Spectre, water, wind, and rock erosion noises for example? Or are we faced with something supernatural? Even perhaps extra-terrestrial? If 'something supernatural' is to be accepted at all, what precisely, in this particular connection, do we mean by 'supernatural'? I must confess that I find this aspect baffling in the extreme.

I think that we must dismiss absolutely from our minds any sort of conception or belief that the Ben MacDhui plateau is the habitat of some living creature or creatures, alien in kind, unhuman in appearance, though walking erect like a man, and endowed perhaps with some measure of intelligence (Sir Hugh and Lady Rankin claimed, did they not, that the Grey Man spoke to them in an unknown tongue?).

John Buchan once wrote a thriller, *The Watcher By The Threshold*, on a similar theme, in which he hinted at a survival of this nature in the Scottish hills. However I, for one, reject entirely this most improbable of explanations. No doubt you would concur.

But, Corrie questioned, do we not tend to regard and place non-human intelligence in two distinct categories – 'scientific' and 'supernatural'? On the one hand we think of the extra-terrestrial creatures of science-speculation fiction like H. G. Well's 'Selenites' in a different mood our minds are loosed on the question of ghosts and fairies, and the like. But the very moment we are compelled to think of a creature or being, in either class, as *real* the distinction becomes blurred, and when the phenomenon is of the Grey Man variety the distinction vanishes outright.

The 'Thing' is not a biological entity or organism. To that extent one has to classify it, tentatively at any rate, in the 'second' group, as the 'Grey Phantom' of the Ben.

Yet, it has been stated that the Grey Man is mobile and capable of producing audible sounds. He has, it is claimed, attempted communication with human observers in whom, normally, his presence inspires fear, even panic. All this would seem to suggest – and suggest only – that the Grey Man has some kind of material vehicle, the presence of which might, in principle, be empirically verified. To that extent the phenomenon could belong to the 'first' group.

And there, it seems to me, [Corrie continued], is the crux of the matter. You see the difficulty? The distinction between 'natural' and 'supernatural' is, in fact, broken down: and when it has done so, one realises how comforting it can be; how it eases the burden of intolerable strangeness which the universe imposes on us by dividing it into two halves, and encouraging the mind never to think of both in the same context. What price we may have paid for this comfort in the way of false security and accepted thought is another matter.

If we are to accept or conclude that the Grey Man is not 'organic', any presumption that intelligence is somehow located in its plasma or photosome, but is not related to it, as our consciousness is related to our brains and nerves, is again profoundly disturbing, and presents added difficulties. It would hardly fit into our categories. The response which we ordinarily make to a living creature, and that which we make to some inanimate objects, would here both be equally inappropriate.

I would go so far as accept that quite a number of observers, whose integrity and intelligence are not in doubt, have both seen and heard something very queer on Ben MacDhui. But what exactly? There is obviously room for much further speculation about the forms in which the Grey Man appeared to their senses. I think that any theory of mass hallucination falls to the ground and can be rejected.

Corrie went on to muse on a Latin writer of the early seventeenth century, Natvilcius (*De Aetherio et aereo Corpore*, Basel 1627, II, xii) who wrote of kindred apparitions of which the following is a translation: 'It appears that the homogeneous flame perceived by our senses is not the body, properly so called, of an angel or daemon, but rather the sensorium of that body, or the surface of a body which exists after a manner beyond our conception in the celestial frame of spatial reference.'

The learned Natvilcius, he thought, was curiously prescient, and even up to date with us here for, by the 'celestial frame of spatial reference' he probably meant what is now called 'multidimensional space'. Natvilcius would know nothing about multi-dimensional geometry, but he had simply reached empirically what mathematicians have since posited on theoretical grounds:

It is certainly difficult to account for these things. I cannot tell. One only knows that Man's mind is old, and his memory a mystery. That, in his brain, some timeless cell may survive, or exist; may still be endowed with dim dreams and ancient dreads – of flights from death and danger long ago. One can only guess about things which are unknown.

The Sphinx makes dumb, subtle motions, as it were, when closely regarded.

Sometimes in dark days, in wild places, Skye in dense mist and rain, in desert, mountains and jungle, I have thought that I got a hint or two. I cannot tell what they were. From our fancied and narrow security, I know, having looked out upon the wilderness in turmoil where there could be no help and no witness of our undoing, where the gleams were fleeting, as though the daylight itself were riven and collapsing, that I saw the filmy shapes of those things which darken and affright the minds of primitives. While the sky is changeful and menacing, and there are storms at sea, when our fellows are absent, when shades take their hour of ease and voices whisper in wood and stone, and mischance and death are veiled, but here we shall have gods and ghosts. The sharp-sighted collectors of old-train lumber, and similar curios, may still keep busy, and tie up their dry bundles of mythology and superstitions; but I myself – and any Scottish hillman or seafarer – could make plenty more.

The Ben MacDhui topic has, perhaps, been obscured by too much emotion and sentiment, and egocentric surmises may be grossly incorrect. The best has been made of what many must regard as an apocryphal subject and what appears to be required is a dispassionate and unemotional appraisal of all the stories about the Grey Man, many of which have been derived from oral sources and have suffered distortion by repetition. A number have been presented here, but there must be many more. Do they survive analysis? If some are lies they are extraordinarily curious fabrications, and must reside not in physical appetites, but in psychological complexes. It is for the reader to judge for himself.

Since the Cairngorms can no longer be preserved in an aspic of traditional remoteness and solitude the Grey Man may migrate to a less disturbed region, but if he persists in manifesting himself, perhaps, some day, a scientific investigation of the physical properties of Ben MacDhui may be conducted in conjunction with the psychic aspect; and in the light of further research, the digging out of new facts, and the review of old ones in a new perspective, a reappraisal of the Grey Man phenomenon may be presented.

The difficulty, however, for anyone whose interest might be sufficiently aroused to delve more deeply into the metaphysical aspects is that para-psychologists do not accept personal adventures or second-hand cases as evidence of para-normal occurrences. They appear to be agreed on three minimum criteria for authentication. The experience must be veridical; it must be related to the actual event that was occurring, had occurred, or would occur.

There must be independent witnesses to testify that the person involved related the experience before knowing by normal means that the experience had been veridical. Not more than five years should have passed between the experience and its recording. Or, having already suffered the cruel indignity of emasculation by the unfortunate introduction of a simple aspirate in the Gaelic adjective ‘mór’ (big), as described in the first paragraph of the Preface, perhaps we might spare the Fear Liath Mór the ultimate humiliation of psychoanalysis!

Reflections

Since the second edition of The Big Grey Man was published in 1989 I have again had innumerable letters, phone calls and a number of visitors recounting their various experiences on Ben MacDhui. Two letters are of particular interest and I am grateful to Dr Cecil Davies of Rainew, Macclesfield for permission to publish the story of an experience he once had in snow conditions on Kinder Scout, the highest summit (2008 ft) in the Peak District at the southern end of the Pennines. It clearly demonstrates how easily climbers can be misled in mist or snow conditions. Unlike Dr Davies, however, the narrators of weird encounters which I have been given so frequently over the years took to their heels and fled from the mountain, especially Ben MacDhui, quite convinced that they had encountered the Big Grey Man.

(Dr Davies' Story)

I spent from the 27th Dec. 1964 to 2nd Jan. 1965 at Derry Lodge with a party, including my son, of students from Swansea University Climbing Club. The weather was severe and our expeditions usually uncomfortable and unsuccessful! We were deeply impressed by the character of Bob Scott, the stalker, and I well remember his dire threats as to what would happen to us if we ever completely turned the water off, so that it froze in the pipe.

One of the young members of the party (at 46 I was about double the age of any others) ventured to ask Bob about the Grey Man. The abrupt reply was in exactly the words quoted by you: we do not talk about that.

How easy it is for a natural happening in the hills to appear (if only momentarily) to be supernatural is illustrated by an incident that happened to me on a solitary winter walk on Kinder Scout. Snow had fallen and the ground was white. I was walking north on the Edge between the Kinder Downfall and William Clough when I saw someone standing on the slopes below me and perhaps several hundred yards ahead. I had seen not a soul all day and the sight of a fellow human being was welcome, standing still with his anorak hood pulled up over his head. I raised my right arm and waved to the stranger, but without pausing in my walk. But as I walked on ready to wave again or to call out,

the figure, instead of responding, became rapidly thinner until it completely vanished! Perhaps for only a fraction of a second I experienced something approaching fear, but at once the explanation became clear.

What I had seen was simply a natural stone pillar. As the snow had been driving, one side had become plastered with it while the other side (my standing figure) remained dark against the snowy background. As I walked forward the dark side moved out of sight while the snowy side blended with the general snow. But what I have never forgotten is the feeling I had that at one moment there was another human being with me on the hill, the next moment which had ceased to exist.

As to the Brocken Spectre, I have seen it twice, each time in the same spot on the Cullin Ridge above Coire Lagan with a low sun in late afternoon and the mists rising from Coruisk. The first time (1961, I was camping in Glenbrittle) I obtained a good photograph of it. The second time, many years later (I was staying at the Coruisk Hut), I was tired and the camera was in the rucksack. Each time I had the Glory round my head. Speaking with others I believe it to be the fact that one sees only the glory round one's own head, even when several people are present (just as one is always at the apparent centre of a rainbow).

There used to be a remote Lodge on Rhum that was haunted. A man's figure simply came and stood by one's bed. By the time my son took me to it (he had been making a map for the Nature Conservancy) the lodge was a ruin, its roof fallen in. What happens to a ghost when its habitat is destroyed, I wonder?

* * *

I am also indebted to John Usher, Edinburgh, for consent to publish the experience he has had, and in particular to his astonishing experience in the Corroul Bothy. His narrative is as follows:

(Mr Usher's Story)

I am an experienced hill climber and back packer having been all over Scotland in Winter and Summer, camping and bothying. I have had some amazing experiences over the years: The Brocken Spectre on numerous occasions; a mini-whirlwind on the Five Sisters (a hot windless day otherwise); a 'Moonbow' in Glenbeg on a moonlit, showery night; a moonbeam in Crete; the Northern Lights, of course; Extra Sensory Perception, involving a friend of mine in Lochgilphead and myself on Goat Fell in Arran; numerous other minor events such as hearing singing and laughing and hearing motor cars approaching while miles from the nearest road. And, yes, the Grey Man.

It was Easter Monday 1976 or 1977 and I had camped at Derry Lodge to be on Ben MacDhui before the masses. Making good progress I was up Sron Riach and on the summit plateau before anybody else. The weather was perfect, the sun was shining,

there wasn't a breath of wind. There was a thick covering of snow right across the plateau and the crystals glistened like thousands of stars. Having satisfied myself that I was alone, although I noticed the black dots on Cairngorm which meant the peace would be shattered soon, I sat at the summit and started on my sandwiches. Suddenly, and very close, I heard the sound of footsteps and heavy breathing. I turned round quickly and saw . . . nothing.

The footsteps continued, heavy, slow, measured. I scanned the foreground, the middle and the distance and saw only the dots on the horizon. Nothing. By now it was as if whatever it was would be upon me any second, yet I wasn't fearful. More expectant.

Suddenly, from Coire Etchachan I saw two figures, ski-mountaineers trudging slowly up to the plateau in slow, measured steps. Problem solved – for me. Whether due to the atmospherics or the auditory properties of the coire the sound must have travelled an amazing distance with unbelievable clarity.

I thought about this later on. If it had been night-time or misty and there had been somebody else on the hill but remained unseen, the fear that would have induced would have been tremendous. As you comment in your book, it is very easy to have hallucinations when tired, scared or hungry. It would be easy to mistake a boulder for a giant, or indeed a house, as a friend of mine once did in Glen Affric.

I know that what I've described is nothing earth-shattering but I hope it will add to the debate.

The Grey Man will continue to be discussed as long as Ben MacDhui exists. There is a magic in the hills, a spirit that gives each climber that goes there whatever that person needs. We all see what we want to see. Just because I feel the phenomenon has been explained to my satisfaction, somebody else might go to the hill tomorrow and find the Grey Man sitting there doing a crossword puzzle. Life is a series of revelations; I am just happy to be part of it all.

I did not mention in my first letter but I too had a strange experience in Corrour Bothy, not as strange as yours but strange nonetheless. I had run down to the Bothy from the Devil's Point as there was a storm coming down the glen. The storm was a really spectacular one with the thunder crashing and lightning hitting the ground, I was relieved at first to be inside and out of it. However, once inside I suddenly had this terrible feeling of something evil being there, and for no rational reason, I felt very afraid. I had to keep looking over my shoulder to see what was behind me. I kept trying to settle myself down, blaming my imagination, but the feeling persisted that there was evil in the room. The only option I felt was to take my chances in the storm. Immediately on stepping outside I felt a sense of relief, even though the rain was lashing down and the air was filled with thunder and lightning. My ordeal wasn't over, however, as the lightning was still hitting the ground, a bit too close for my liking. I sat down on my rucksack in a peat hag until I noticed someone camping down by the Dee. It was a family who were doing the glens and once I had a mug of tea and a bite to eat I was O.K.

The only natural thing I can think of is that, with the electricity in the air, it made me a bit edgy and nervous. However, I have since spoken to other bothy visitors and they admitted to feeling edgy at Corrour – maybe there is a presence there

My own feelings are, as I think I stated in my first letter, that natural phenomena cause most of these paranormal events. Now that I'm married with a family and go to the hills only rarely for day trips the paranormal events seem to have stopped, which makes me think that one has to be 'in tune' with the hills. A lovely thought.

* * *

Mr Usher is not alone in having experienced something inimical in Corrour Bothy. This arouses much curiosity in me. I was, I think, the very first 'tenant' of the Corrour after the practice of stationing a Deer Watcher there during the Mar Stalking Season ceased at the end of the 1914–18 Great War. It became almost a second home to me because I could reach it packing a heavy load in about two and a half hours from my home. I spent very many lonely nights there because there were few people on the Cairngorms in those days and I had them, more or less, all to myself except for the occasional encounter with members of the Aberdeen Cairngorm Club.

There is no record of John MacIntosh, the last Watcher, or any of the Stalkers who preceded him ever encountering anything abnormal during their occupation, and in my own frequent sojourns there the atmosphere was always wholly benign. Even the one strange experience I did have and which is described in this [page](#), was to my mind far from being inimical except for one brief moment or two of unnameable fear when I was alerted by hearing my name in a long drawn out whisper and I identified it with the barring of the door.

Might the ghost of the ill-fated (?) soldier for whom the corrie above Corrour, 'Coire an t-Saighdeir,' (The Soldier's Corrie) is named haunt Corrour? No clue appears to exist about his identity. It might well have been one of the soldiers who perished in the Marquis of Huntly's pursuit westwards of MacCailean Mòr, the Marquis of Argyll after the battle of Glen Livet in 1590. There is an Argyll Stone on Creag Dubh in Glen Eanaich in Rothiemurchus.

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To the following authors and/or publishers of copyright works for permission to include extracts from the following books:

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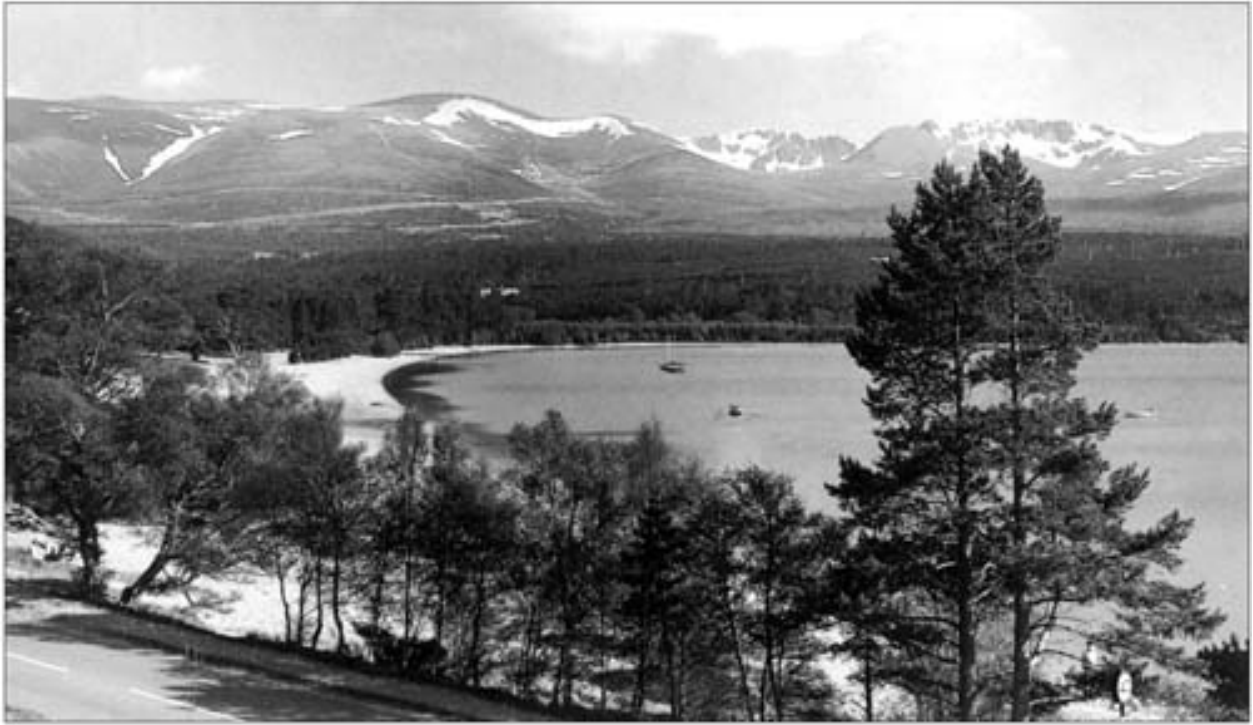
In the first edition I was indebted to my old departed friends, Hamish Corrie for annotating the original typescript, and contributing valuable thoughts on the subject; Henry Cook for much useful advice; Arthur Forbes and Iain Grant of memorable friendship for their forbearance and patience in numerous long discussions into the small hours of the morning.

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Endnotes

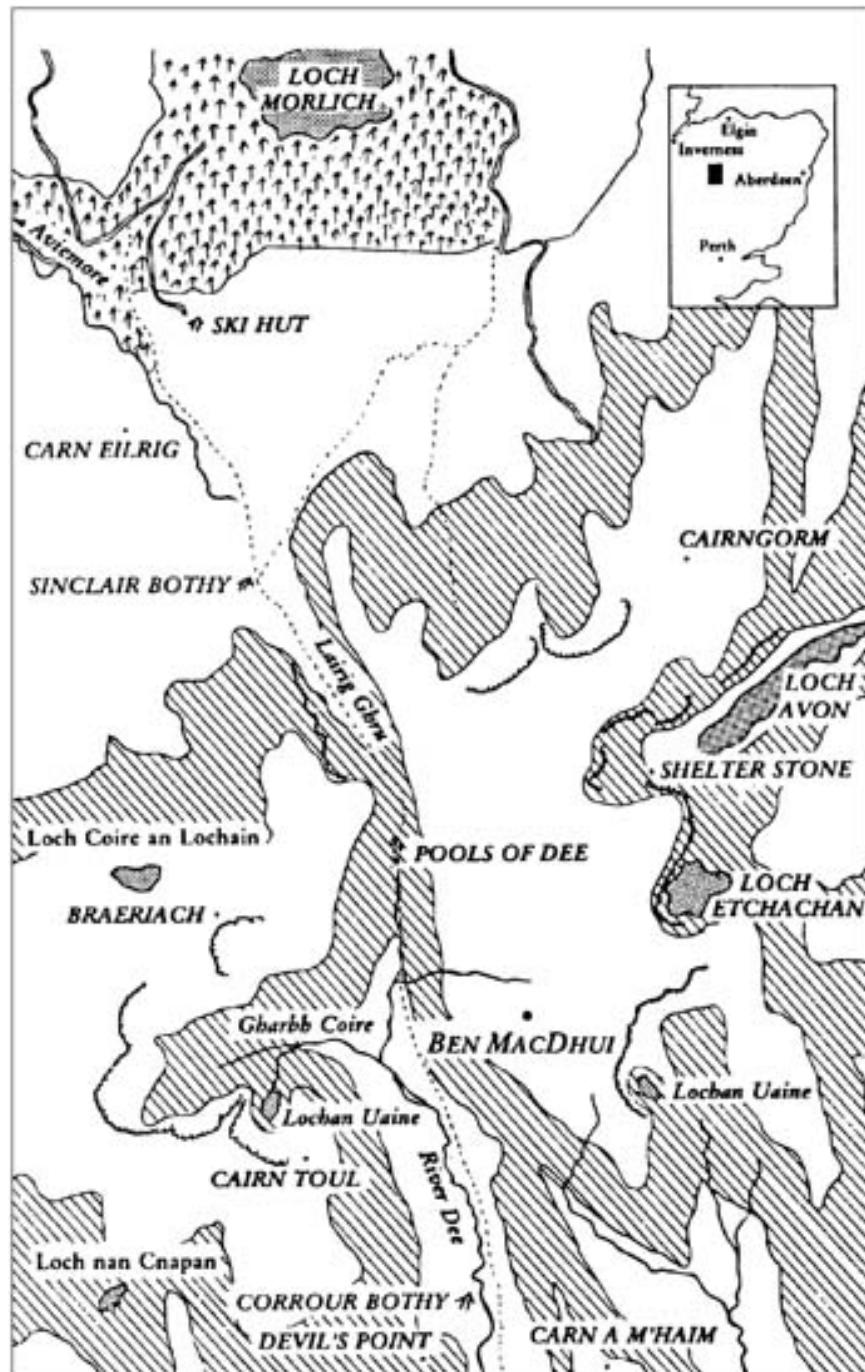
- [1.](#) Kellas's story is recorded in Chapter 2.
- [2.](#) *The Times* has unfortunately been unable to trace the letter from the Professor.
- [3.](#) Mr Gordon is not strictly correct here. Actually there were three pipers at Luibeg that day.
- [4.](#) See [here](#)
- [5.](#) These stories are dealt with most comprehensively by the late Lieut-Commander R. T. Gould in his remarkable book *Oddities. A Book of Unexplained Facts*.
- [6.](#) It is made clear, of course, that the would-be pilgrims must perform the practices taught by the Aetherius Society.



[Cairngorm and the north-facing corries](#)



[Ben MacDhui from Carn Toul](#)



[Map of Big Grey Man territory.](#)



[Loch Eanaich from above Coire Odhar](#)



[Carn Toul and Sgurr an Lochan Uaine from the Cairngorm–Ben MacDhui plateau](#)



[The Author on the Cairngorm Club footbridge](#)



[The Cairngorm–Ben MacDhui plateau from the air](#)



[The rehabilitated Corroun Bothy below the Devil's Point](#)



[Snow bridge over the Garbh Uisge Beag](#)



[Grandson John Robertson as a boy, looking down on Loch A'an](#)



[Strange footprints in the snow as seen and photographed by J.A. Rennie](#)



[Looking west from summit of Cairngorm](#)



[The Lairig Ghru Pass](#)



[The waters of Loch Etchachan below the crags of Ben MacDhui](#)



[Cairngorm summit and radio station](#)



[Looking south from Cairngorm](#)